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***First-generation African Caribbean women pursuing learning in the third age  
and beyond: an emancipatory role for lifelong learning in community settings?***

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy

School of Social Sciences, History and Philosophy

Birkbeck, University of London

August 2014

## Declaration

I declare that all material in this thesis is the result of my own work and that I have duly acknowledged any work from the published or unpublished work of other persons. I also confirm that no material has been submitted for which a degree has already been conferred on me.

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August 2014

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the benefits of lifelong learning and employs narrative inquiry as a key methodological tool to assess the value of learning in later years for black Caribbean women who came to Britain in the 1950s and early 1960s with the expectation of a better life. The study engages with black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2001; Hudson-Weems, 2004) to explore social and cultural identities brought to learning, illustrating solidarity in Caribbean sisterhood as the women find ways to rise above past and current oppression. The research examines the nature of learning for a category of women who are living at a time when being black, female and older is often associated with deteriorating health, poverty and isolation and challenges those who might argue that in urban areas, older minority populations have little to offer.

Lifelong learning has been studied in a variety of ways and diverse research has examined its nature (Coffield, 1997, Field, 2000), its significant benefits (Schuller, 2001); its role in an ageing society (McNair, 2007, Withnall, 2000, Aldridge and Tuckett, 2001, Soulsby, 1999, McGivney, 1999), and in addressing class and gender divides (Jackson, 2004). However, limited empirical research exists exploring lifelong learning and minority ethnic communities and this study therefore seeks to make an important contribution in this area.

The context for the research is located within the wider, largely economic debates into lifelong learning and often conflicting government rhetoric in the UK. It is set against a backdrop of shifting policies and diminishing resources for widening participation and adult learning and acknowledges the global challenge of an ageing society. Through contemporary narrative inquiry embedded primarily in the works of, Clandinin (2007) and Chase (2005), the study draws on the narratives of 102 older African Caribbean women, exploring the social and political dimensions of lifelong learning, alongside the individual benefits, and questions the extent to which their learning also benefits their wider communities.

## **Acknowledgements**

I owe a debt of gratitude to my supervisors, Dr Linda Milbourne and Professor John Annette who provided me with the motivation and impetus to remain focused and in control of my thesis. I acknowledge that without their support and encouragement, completion of this research would not have been possible.

**Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to my late mother, Veronica Neola Charlemagne Etienne, a strong, determined, first generation African Caribbean woman who nurtured in me a sense of pride, courage and determination to achieve our shared educational goals.

I also dedicate this work to Lloyd, whose love, patience and staunch support helped me survive some very turbulent times in the course of conducting my research.

Finally I dedicate this research to Tannis and all those second and third generation African Caribbean sisters steeped in the ever present struggle to flourish in the academy.

## **Abbreviations**

BGOP	Better Government for Older People programme
BME	Black minority ethnic
CEC	Commission of the European Communities
GLPA	Greater London Pensioners Association
IFLL	Inquiry into the future for lifelong learning
JRF	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
IVR	Institute for Volunteering Research
NHS	National Health Service
NIACE	National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PASC	Public Affairs Select Committee
PEFETE	Pan European Forum for Education for the Elderly
RARPA	Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific Cultural Organisation
WI	Women's Institute

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## **Chapter One: Introduction: Acknowledging the black woman's persistent expression of educational desire**

### **Introduction**

*I was just a child when I came here and my mum used to say, you have to do well in your education, they have the best schools here in Great Britain and you have to do well. But she did not know what I had to put up with back then. I had a hard job defending myself in that school, but now, I able to defend my community by going back to school! Yes – lifelong learning is good for defending the community. I enjoy learning now – I can see its purpose (Elsena, Meads)<sup>1</sup>.*

Despite several decades of informal learning and volunteering in the community and after a lifetime of participating in a range of initiatives aimed at widening participation, why are first generation African Caribbean women<sup>2</sup> still in search of a place in the academy (Mirza, 2009)? This thesis draws on the collective lifelong learning experiences of black women, who came to the UK in search of employment and who now consider educational gains, in the third age and beyond, a major priority. For the majority of women in this study, meaningful satisfaction from working in the community can only be fully realised when education at the 'highest level' has been achieved.

### **Positioning the research**

My thesis is a narrative inquiry exploring the benefits of lifelong learning in an ageing society. This type of learning has been described as a continuum of the learning process that takes place at all levels – *formal, non-formal* and *informal* – a broad and ambiguous

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1 A statement from a woman in the study

2 Black women, who came to the UK in large numbers in the 1950s and 1960s from a variety of Caribbean islands

concept embracing education that is flexible, diverse and available at different times and places and pursued throughout life (Field, 2006a). Lifelong learning has been explored in many different ways and by many different commentators (Coffield, 2000; Griffin, 2000; Field, 2000; Mayo, 2000; Jackson, 2005; Burke and Jackson, 2007). My research focuses on the benefits of learning for first generation / older African Caribbean women<sup>3</sup>: those who migrated to the UK in significant numbers in the 1950s and 1960s. These black women may be activists, who volunteer in their local communities and, at the same time, participate in particular types of learning activities, often intended to provide them with skills to play a fuller, more active role in strengthening their local neighbourhoods. The value of this participation is an important question in a multi-ethnic society in the UK with an increasing number of older citizens who view themselves as learning past retirement age, since the right to learn through life is considered by many as a basic human right (Schuller and Watson, 2009). My use of 'black' encompasses people of Caribbean and African heritage, at the same time recognising that there are those that reject the term 'black' as being steeped in a divisive post-colonial discourse (Rollock, 2013), a debate which will be considered further in Chapter 2.

Complementing my narrative inquiry, my thesis uses black feminist epistemology both as a theoretical frame and a methodological lens to capture the unique nature of black feminist learning, where formidable attitudes and the originality of West Indian colloquialisms and culture that generate confidences and inspire others are displayed. My research seeks to explore whether learning in later years can help older black women play a role in tackling social exclusion in their communities by increasing social networks; accessing male dominated spaces; and widening knowledge, and thereby allowing greater access to better health care and social mobility.

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3 In this study, black women who came to the UK in the early 1950s and 1960s from the former British West Indian islands are often referred to as 'older black women'. 'Older' refers to women who are aged 50 and older.

For the older black Caribbean population (aged 65 and over), who now comprise the largest group of non-white people in the UK, poverty is a major concern (McNair, 2009), and a significant number of studies, for example, Withnall (2002), MacNair (2007), Maynard (2003) have demonstrated links between lifelong learning, ageing and well-being. Such research has indicated that, similar to other ethnic groups, older black women learners are likely to have a role to play in helping to meet the needs of an ageing population. Studies have also explored the benefits of lifelong learning in the UK (Schuller et al, 2001, Field, 2000), both in later years (Schuller, 2009) and in relation to gender inequalities (Jackson, 2006). However, a major gap exists in research in the area of lifelong learning and black and minority ethnic communities and my research derives from the apparent absence of work in this area.

### **Rationale for my study**

The rationale for my study has emerged from three broad areas of my vocational life as follows.

#### *1) Academic rationale – limitations in the lifelong learning literature*

My review of existing literature (Chapters 2 and 3) recognizes that limited research exists into lifelong learning and older black and ethnic minority communities in the UK. Whilst studies provide evidence of research into the lives of older learners, NIACE underlines that the research on lifelong learning and black and minority communities remains sparse (NIACE, 2005a). NIACE (1999) and Arber (2006) indicate that there is likely to be a great deal of information on lifelong learning practices occurring in the older black and minority ethnic (BME) community which are yet to be acknowledged, examined or promoted as lifelong learning. In addition, Field (2006:16b) notes that ‘we still know very little about lifelong learning and black and minority communities’, suggesting a need for researchers to come forward in this area. Dadzie’s study (1993) for NIACE into educational provision for ethnic minority elders provided an opening for further empirical research to emerge in this area but, almost two decades later, there is still little empirical evidence available.

In 2000, Mayo asserted that the lack of knowledge in this area was such an anomaly that it rendered the lifelong learning needs of black and minority ethnic communities largely invisible. My study does not focus on all black and minority ethnic groups but concentrates on one minority ethnic group – namely, the older African Caribbean community. While there are likely to be important similarities which emerge in considering lifelong learning across different black and minority ethnic communities, Berthoud et al (1997) argue that ‘ethnic minority groups are not all the same, nor are they contentless and substitutable for one another’ (Berthoud, Modood and Smith, 1997:9). It is only a close and detailed focus in one area that appears likely to capture significant meaning about the phenomenon, and therefore my study aims to focus in depth on understanding one group rather than seeking to generalise and include other BME groups.

Older people from black minority ethnic communities remain ‘absent from existing learning provision for numerous reasons, including the fact that the provision available to them is often irrelevant, culturally inappropriate and inaccessible’ (NIACE, 2005a:16). We are experiencing an ageing population in the UK, and at both national and international level research into lifelong learning and ageing is being conducted through important initiatives such as: Healthy Ageing and Lifelong Learning in Australia (Clulow and Bartlet, 2009); Continuing Education for Seniors in Canada (Narushima, 2009), Ageing learners in the United States (Bills, 2010); Pan European Forum for Education for the Elderly (PEFETE, 2004). Close attention is being given to the valuable role that learning plays in later life, not least as different countries faced with economic crises consider voluntary action and community developments as ways to reduce welfare spending (Milbourne, 2013). This study aims to add to this growing work on older learners through contributing in an area where research is sparse.

## *2) Social justification – what support for a growing elderly black population?*

An additional justification and rationale for my study came as a result of the change in the UK’s older ethnic population (Maynard, 2004), demonstrating that, among the non-white population, the black Caribbean population appeared to have the largest proportion of people aged 65 and over (11 per cent). This reflected the first large-scale migration of



non-white groups to Britain in the 1950s, making them the most elderly minority ethnic group (Maynard et al: 2008:4) in the country. In addition, the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) had stressed that: ‘Over the next 50 years, the current proportion of black and minority ethnic elders is set to grow significantly (NIACE: 2007a: 3)’. As a result, I was interested in the role that black Caribbean women might play in responding to this change. How might satisfying their educational desires also achieve support for others in an ageing society? Having recognised the wide acknowledgement of the value of lifelong learning (Field, 2000; Schuller et al, 2004) and also the benefits of lifelong learning for older learners (Withnall, 2000b, 2003, 2006; Jackson, 2006; Tuckett and McCauley, 2005), I began to question the extent to which such narratives were representative of my mother’s generation (the first generation of African Caribbeans in Britain) or, indeed, other black women of my own generation.

In their study of volunteering in the community, the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) exposed the link between social exclusion and volunteering and in this context identified volunteering as: ‘Offering time and help to others’ and involving a ‘cost to the volunteer which was greater than any benefit they might receive from the activity’ (Paine et al, 2010:8). From the volunteer’s point of view, an earlier study showed that volunteering was considered:

A mutually beneficial exchange relationship and ‘something that provides benefits to the individual, be it enjoyment, skills, or the sense of having given something back’ (IVR, 2004:25).

In this context, my research seeks to explore the possibilities and extent of such ‘mutually beneficial exchange’ relationships, largely from the point of view of the women volunteers.

Earlier research into social inequalities and ethnic minorities in Britain (Evandrou, 2000) and more recent studies by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2007) revealed high levels of poverty amongst Britain’s black and minority ethnic communities, producing barriers and preventing access to particular types of learning. Despite this, Maynard’s (2003) research into women from different ethnic and economic backgrounds revealed a growing

number of women, 'more positive and clearly wishing to play an important role in tackling social exclusion and in developing the world around them' (ibid: 2003:15), raising questions for my study around the motivations and benefits of both learning and voluntary action for the women involved and others around them. For older black women, poverty and social exclusion have often been particular blights on their learning aspirations and Cullen et al (2000) noted that informal learning is in fact widening participation and, by participating in informal community learning, older black women may have a key role to play also in giving back and addressing wider learning development.

### *3) Personal justification – marginalisation of older black women in the community*

The personal justification and motivation for my study came from a number of strands of my own volunteering and working life which came together over time. First, this interest emerged from my roles as a community volunteer; worker; a women's rights officer engaging with older women activists who were confronting racial discrimination in areas such as housing, in some of the most ethnically diverse areas of London. Secondly, my personal justification surfaced in the early 1990s when I began working as an extra-mural and continuing education tutor in higher education. Here, whilst teaching on widening participation programmes, it was not unusual for me to encounter older black women (who worked as volunteers in the community) participating in group tasks on women's access programmes alongside younger learners, developing skills for active citizenship in their local community. My belief then was that their success on these programmes was largely due to their shared cultural backgrounds and the fact that they faced similar struggles in their lives. As a result, they were often able to develop strong informal 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and it appeared that learning as a form of social and community engagement tool was highly influential in their lives.

I also gave consideration to the relevance of the question posed by Mirza (2009), when conducting research with young people in schools and in higher education where she asked: 'Why in the context of endemic race and gender inequality, is there a persistent expression of educational desire amongst black and ethnicised women?' (2009:8). I

considered how such a question may be posed equally to older black women activists and it became a key motivation for my study. However, I also acknowledged from my experience that older black women have often developed greater coping mechanisms to deal with ‘endemic race and gender inequality’ as a result of their many years of experience of marginalisation both in the UK and in the Caribbean. I felt a strong desire to get to the root of such coping strategies and to understand their earlier educational experiences and aspirations: what form did these take for first generation African Caribbean women in particular? Throughout this time of constructing my research focus, I considered my own third wave feminist determination to improve the lives of women and to be part of the dialogue for change in relation to inequalities that Mirza (ibid) identifies. I also became acutely aware of my own desire for higher levels of education to help empower myself and other women to develop individually and collectively and to extend the boundaries of study. This mutual aspiration for learning and education as a ‘good’ which is invulnerable is captured in a poem by Caribbean poet, Louise Bennett:

*Mi full up mi purse wid money,  
Dem tief it weh from me.  
Mi full up mi belly wid food  
An as mi sneeze mi feel hungry.  
Mi full up mi brain wid learnin,  
Wid sense and Knowledge gran,  
Mi feel relief not a tief can tief  
Mi education!*

(Extract 1 from poem entitled: *Education* by Louise Bennett, 1982:12)

Further personal justification for my research came from working as a research assistant in Higher Education undertaking a sponsored study into lifelong learning in the Women’s Institute (WI) (Etienne and Jackson, 2010). I was able to explore the ways in which groups of older, white and predominately middle class women members of the largest voluntary organisation for women in the UK interacted with each other in informal

settings. I noted the extent to which they learned from each other; how they supported each other; and how they enjoyed the benefits of informal learning in their later years. Conducting this research provided me with valuable insights into the benefits of learning, as perceived by a distinct group of older women learners, and made me aware of the limited research that existed relating to older black women. I learnt from the study that being educated and having a high level of social capital (Etienne and Jackson, 2011) can result in better health and happiness for the individual but not necessarily for the wider local community. Most of the members of the WI involved in the study had already acquired higher education, and informal learning was now playing an important role in maintaining their well-being. I wondered what the position of older black women might be. I reflected on my own position, as a tutor and as a researcher of the social world, and considered the involvement of other black women working in similar fields. What future role might we play in an ageing society and how had our educational aspirations been shaped by earlier generations?

### **Why study an ageing black population?**

In the early stages of analysing the rationale for my research, I was confronted by my peers about my reasons for choosing to study an ageing population. What was the attraction? More to the point, why study an ageing black population in what was often described as a largely ageist, racist society, focused primarily on maximising the economic potential of the younger, frequently male population (Maynard, 2002)? I specifically concerned myself with why I should be interested in the learning needs of an ageing minority ethnic female population. What additional value would understanding the older black female learner bring to the lifelong learning debate? My argument was, first, that there were pressing feminist, social, moral and economic reasons for studying an ageing black female population, borne out by the large numbers of first generation African Caribbean women with significant skills and characteristics, as a result of previously working in important areas of the public services (Amos and Parmar, 1984). Such skills, including resourcefulness, courage and strength in the face of adversity have still to be fully recognised, yet could be of benefit to an ageing society. Whether former factory workers, auxiliary nurses in the National Health Service (NHS) or care workers in

the Social Care sector, it seems irrational to ignore their potential contribution in a society where welfare spending is diminishing but the proportional age of the UK population is growing. Second, exploring the role of informal learning in a neglected section of an ageing population might also offer important insights into the role of community learning and its implications for longer-term health and well-being.

### **Research aims and research questions**

My key concerns are embedded in a commitment to understanding the various manifestations of lifelong learning in an ageing, diverse and unequal society, whilst at the same time seeking to contribute to improving the lives of older black women. In examining the benefits of lifelong learning and the need to ensure that the often absent voices of older black women learners are heard, my research also questions the privileging of an economic agenda for lifelong learning at the expense of an important social agenda. Learning in later life has been linked to the potential to tackle social exclusion, promote active citizenship and – in the context of older women – encourage well-being and social participation. This research prioritises the voices of older black women and seeks to shed light on the influence and roles of older black females active in community settings, as well as the significance of learning and ‘community’ in their lives.

My thesis explores the benefits of lifelong learning for older black women, who are involved in a wide variety of learning opportunities in community settings. By engaging with black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2000; Hudson-Weems, 2004 and others), I aim to examine the intersectional relationships apparent in the social settings where learning takes place, as women with different levels of past education interact across social classes. Among my purposes are to explore the ways in which the women have gained access to learning; their approaches to participating; their learning histories; how they understand contemporary learning; and the type of barriers they have faced in the past and more recently. My hope is that my research will extend the spaces in literature

where the hitherto absent voices of first generation African Caribbean women can be represented and may contribute to influencing social policy and strategies for an ageing multicultural society.

In framing my broad research question, I asked:

*In what ways and to what extent are first generation African Caribbean women able to achieve benefits from lifelong learning for themselves as well as for their wider communities?*

My more specific research (sub) questions are:

- a) *What is the nature of the women's participation in lifelong learning?*
- b) *What barriers do the women face in accessing learning?*
- c) *What opportunities do the women experience in accessing learning?*
- d) *What are the benefits of lifelong learning for older black women?*
- e) *What are the benefits of such learning for the wider community?*

### **Structure of thesis – summary of chapters**

This thesis comprises 9 chapters. In this first chapter, I have positioned my research in relation to lifelong learning and first generation African Caribbean women, providing a rationale for my study as well as my aims and research questions. I have deliberately chosen to place next, a chapter, which locates the study within social theory and methodology. Chapter 2 examines engagement with black feminist epistemology, explaining the lens through which I explore lifelong learning and ideas of community, as well as my approach to narrative inquiry. This chapter provides the starting point for my approach to examining the discourse on lifelong learning, and also connects black feminist epistemology with the learning and aspirations of older black women volunteering in UK urban settings. The chapter draws on American studies in the works

of Collins (2009), Hudson-Weems (2004), Gregory (2001), Sheared (1996), hooks (1994); and also feminist commentators in the UK, such as Mirza (2009) and Sudbury (1998); and it identifies the need for a UK-based black womanist perspective arising from the distinct learning experiences and aspirations of black women in Britain.

Black feminist epistemology reflects aspirations for social justice, strength and unity in the African Diaspora and Chapter 2 offers historical and conceptual lenses through which to explore the particular experiences of older black Caribbean women in the UK, also drawing on the poems of Caribbean women such as: Louise Bennett, Jean Binta Breeze and writers such as Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe. The work of Reynolds (2005), in particular, highlights the predominant role of the black Caribbean mother and acknowledges the significance of African Caribbean culture and kinship. Referring to the work of Collins, Hudson-Weems and bell hooks, I draw on both black feminist thought and Africana womanist theory to expose the nuances in black feminist theory and how they can help to interrogate individual and collective benefits of learning among older black women.

In Chapter 3, I examine the nature of lifelong learning as a significant body of knowledge within educational research and analyse the work of key lifelong learning commentators such as Coffield (1997), Griffin (1999), Tuckett (1997), Field (2000), Schuller et al (2004) and Jackson (2005). The chapter considers literature exploring the benefits of learning, as well as the learning needs of an ageing society (McNair, 2007) and seeks to locate the position of older black and minority ethnic communities within these frames, observing the limited research which focuses explicitly on older black women. The chapter discusses research into older learners (Withnall, 2000) and provides insights into the social and community needs of older people, questioning the reasons for the absence of published literature focusing on lifelong learning and black and minority ethnic communities, particularly in the light of an ageing black population.

Discussions follow on the nature of social capital and active citizenship and the chapter alludes to the potentially important role that lifelong learning can play in tackling social exclusion in the older black population. The chapter also examines gendered perspectives

in lifelong learning research, highlighting empirical work conducted with older women learners (Jackson and Etienne, 2011) and the rise of interest in debates around informal learning (Jackson, 2007). These perspectives point to the value of understanding the social dimensions and benefits of lifelong learning, challenging the tendency for economic dimensions to predominate in policy. This also leads to questions about the place of lifelong learning in recent research and campaigns and the extent to which it can be located as integral to mainstream social policy in recent concerns about a growing older population.

Chapter 4 (Methodology), sets out my philosophical approach to research methodology and my ontological and epistemological beliefs. It gives the reasons for my choice of qualitative and narrative approaches to the research, engaging with the work of Chase (2005); Clandinin (2000); Elliot (2005) and others. The chapter discusses various approaches to narrative research and analysis, describes the scope of the study, my methods of data collection, use of interviews and approaches to interpreting the stories recounted. Here, the chapter makes connections with black feminist epistemology as underpinning the methodology and discusses my own feminism in conducting this research as a second generation African Caribbean woman. I go on to discuss my pilot study and demonstrate how it prepared me for the main study. In the design of my study, I also considered how to trace the perceived benefits of learning as the women narrate their stories from past, to present and future, guided by the first of Clandinin's (2000) commonplaces of narrative inquiry, *temporality*.

I then move on to re-state my broad research question and dig beneath the surface of the question in order to fully appreciate its dimensions. I present my ethical considerations; how I chose the women for my sample; how I explored their hopes, desires and concerns in relation to their perceptions of the benefits of lifelong learning. I also discuss how I grappled with my position as a black researcher working with black research participants, and in so doing I go on to engage with the second of the commonplaces of narrative inquiry (ibid): *sociality*. In exploring *place*, the third and final commonplace, I consider the significance of the locations where interviews took place (cultural centres, community



halls) and discuss the women's expressed commitment to serving their wider communities.

Chapter 5, entitled *The Heart of the Race*<sup>4</sup> explores informal learning among first generation African Caribbean women and is the first to present my empirical data. In performance style, it presents the stories of women interviewed, mainly in groups, as they focused on their experiences of learning in community contexts, and it was in recounting these experiences that I first observed the powerful nature of learning occurring in informal social networks. Following Lave and Wenger (1991:14) I found myself asking: 'What kinds of social engagements provided the proper context for learning to take place?' This chapter illustrates the ways that women – mothers, aunts, grandmothers and great-grandmothers – learn alongside each other and also speak sternly, constantly challenging each other in Caribbean patois; whilst, seemingly, their narratives offer profound insights into the nuances of their learning experiences from one Caribbean island to another. Their stories regularly feature references to 'back home'; 'educating each other'; 'learning from others'; and shed light on how the wider benefits of lifelong learning in later years are framed through earlier experiences of education.

Chapter 6, which I have called: *In search of our carnival spirits*<sup>5</sup>, explores non-formal learning among first generation African Caribbean women, again presented through the stories women recounted of volunteering in the community and participating in informal learning programmes held at community centres, elders' clubs, Caribbean centres, regeneration offices and women's centres. It discusses the nature and experiences of learning through initiatives and programmes, such as City Challenge and the New Deal for Communities in which the women had participated, considering how the work of Bennett (1982), Binta Breeze (1988) and citizenship roles discussed in academic studies

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4 This title is taken from Bryan et al's (1985) publication of the same name, exploring black women's lives in Britain.

5 For first generation African Caribbean women – An expression of new found freedom but also a yearning for an earlier, more frivolous life

conducted by Mayo (2000a), Moriarty (2003), Maynard (2004) and Withnall (2006) can help to shed light on these experiences of community participation.

Chapter 7 is the third and final chapter presenting empirical data, entitled: *Spreading our wings*<sup>6</sup>; and explores experiences and perceptions of formal learning among first generation African Caribbean women. The stories of the women are largely drawn from individual accounts and help to explain some of the barriers to learning, ways that they have been overcome and also the rationale for the women's different learning aspirations.

The next two chapters discuss and analyse themes drawn from the women's stories around experiences of learning in different contexts and settings: the opportunities, the reasons for participating, aspirations, benefits and barriers. Chapter 8 both responds to the main research question and highlights examples of ways that learning in these settings is valuable in tackling social exclusion in the wider communities. The findings reveal that lifelong learning has significant benefits for first generation African Caribbean women *and* for others around them. Despite a lifetime of informal learning and volunteering in their communities, many of these women still believe that they can make a greater contribution by giving back into their communities. However, they often still believe that it is only through learning at the highest level that their contributions have significant value in a wider societal sense.

Chapter 9 goes on to draw together aspects of these findings, summarising and investigating the implications of responses to the research questions in the light of some of the literature. Engaging with black feminist thought, the chapter highlights the major reasons for learning in later years among first generation African Caribbean women and discusses implications of the barriers to learning that they have faced, as well as highlighting the personal satisfaction and community gains from the women's access to education at all levels. The chapter concurs with Collins' (2000: 255) analysis that whilst lifelong learning has important benefits, 'unfortunately, the many structural barriers that impede black women's access to education....make it difficult for many to express self-

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6 A quote from one of the women in the study

defined women's agendas'. The chapter also re-visits the work of Schuller and Watson (2009), and Jackson (2010), assessing the future educational prospects of black women learners who volunteer in the community sector. Whilst acknowledging the important role that many of these women have played in caring for others in their communities (Maynard, 2001; Moriarty, 2003), the research stresses that the social dimension to lifelong learning needs to be better and more widely valued, recognising that older black women should not be ignored but have an important role to play as lifelong learners in helping to tackle social exclusion and enhance active community roles more widely. The research concludes that in an ageing, diverse society, learning for older black women has important individual and collective benefits and in this context, lifelong learning can help to meet the educational aspirations of older black women, with significant wider social and political benefits.

### **Chapter conclusion**

In this chapter, I have presented the nature of the problem I seek to address, the significance of the issue, and why I believe it should be tackled. My key concerns are embedded in a commitment to strengthening an understanding of the value of learning in an ageing, multi-cultural society. In acknowledging the important benefits of lifelong learning drawn from other studies, my aim is to ensure that the hidden voices of older black women learners are clearly heard, even if this may mean challenging those who would prioritise an economic agenda for lifelong learning in favour of a wider social agenda. Older black women who are learning in their later years may have the potential to tackle social exclusion and to generate wider active citizenship, and these are dynamics that I seek to uncover within the context of my study. The justification for my research is clear: being part of a wider community of learning at any age is of significant value and for older black women, who face potentially higher levels of marginalisation, learning in later life is likely to have significant benefits. It is to explore and understand these that subsequent chapters turn.

## **Chapter Two: Black feminist epistemology: Contextualising lifelong learning and older black women**

### **Introduction: An engagement with black feminist epistemology**

In the previous chapter I outlined the need to address an absence of research around black women learners in lifelong learning, in particular, older learners who experienced barriers to educational achievement earlier in their lives. This chapter explores a particular lens adopted for this research, drawing on black feminist epistemology. That the research participants are black, are women and also older, is crucial, and drawing on this knowledge base therefore also informs my approach to empirical study. Collins (1990) describes a research methodology aimed at collecting and analysing data from marginalised persons. This Africentric feminist epistemology attempts to provide a medium through which interpretation of behaviour and thought is grounded in the history, culture, economics, race, gender, language, and religion of those involved in the research (Sheared, 1996:4). However, as Fine et al. (2005) highlight, feminist and critical social researchers committed to challenging unequal power relations should also ask themselves for whom the research is undertaken and take care to avoid reinforcing existing prejudices and stereotypes which could be used to legitimate participants' oppression. It is with these perspectives in mind that I am seeking a path through existing debates to frame my study.

Other theoretical frameworks underpinning my thesis are located within the multiple understandings of lifelong learning discussed in the next chapter; but in the context of this research are specifically informed by black feminist epistemology. This chapter then first grapples with theories of 'Black Feminist Thought' and 'Black Feminist Standpoint' theory, located within black feminist epistemologies, and emphasises a methodology that is strongly associated with 'community', in the context of learning. The chapter draws on the works of Collins (2000), Hudson-Weems (2004), Sheared (1999) and Alfred (2004), and is also informed by the work of hooks (1989), Bennett (1982), Barriteau (2004), Reynolds (2005), Mirza (2009), Abrams (2010) and others, whilst in parallel,

acknowledging the nature of activism and learning through which older black women may participate in community settings. Older black women's community-based learning comprises many forms (Alfred, 2007a; Mirza, 2009) but in this work, I specifically concentrate on its relationship with the voluntary roles of older black women who actively participate in ways which facilitate their own learning. According to Collins (2000: 205), such women 'do not only feel accountable to their own kin, they experience a bond with all of the Black community's children' through an 'ethic of social responsibility and individualism'. In the case of older black women who have been volunteering in UK urban communities, this ethic of 'social individualism' may have a triple dimension to it. This chapter will go on to make the connections between different aspects of black feminist thinking and their relevance for this study.

### **Black women, learning and a 'sense of community'**

In pursuing my research into lifelong learning and first generation African Caribbean women, I acknowledged that the search for lifelong learning and the significance placed on education is not unique to older black Caribbean women (Bariso, 2004) and so I begin this section by asking: what do we know of the motivations for learning in later life for women, who, as literature (eg Bryan et al, 1985, Evandrou, 2000, Gregg, 2005) highlights, have often experienced multiple levels of discrimination and sacrificed a large part of their younger years in supporting others? Why should learning matter at this stage? If acquired, how useful might such learning be to the women or, indeed, to the rest of society? I found some answers in exploring the notion of 'community', which in the context of first generation African Caribbean women, can best be understood by acknowledging a collective struggle to combat discrimination at the hands of a new and uncertain society (Amos and Parmar, 1984, Bryan et al, 1985, Mirza, 2003). I would also go further to suggest that community, in this context, can also be viewed as a shared, cultural membership of minds, invisibly led by women and determined to publicly and personally challenge discrimination. In other words, as Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992:21) assert: a strong 'black community' of women and men, working together to achieve social justice.

Exploring further, I drew on the work of Reynolds (2005) and Plaza (2000) who point to the predominant role of the black Caribbean mother in the maintenance of cultural and kinship connections. For first generation African Caribbean women, working together for the good of the community is comparable to an unwritten rule adopted by those often volunteering in the community (Reay and Mirza, 1997). However, 'community' is both a contested and an illusory concept Brent (2009) despite its widespread use, and encompasses people allied by locality; by common interests, heritage and identities; and by virtual networks. Influenced by communitarian thinking (Etzioni, 1996), community is invariably constructed as consensual; and competing interests (Hoggett, 1997) and conflicts 'are rendered invisible' through a language lacking context, ungendered and unraced (Newman, 2000: 57). Thus, understandings of community often disregard the extent to which communities both include and exclude, and the tensions that such inclusions and exclusions contain (Milbourne and Murray, 2011). While my study refers mainly to communities of shared identity and history, the women involved also come together through common localities or community settings, where they may both experience exclusion and also connections with others or outsiders to their communities.

Across the African Diaspora, black women have, for some time now, sought a distinct voice in a determination to 'serve the community'. As Alice Walker (1982:21), asserts: 'So, we teach the young ones, babysit the babies, look after the old and sick, and attend birthing mothers. Our days are fuller than ever.' This depiction of social or community responsibility is demonstrated in a variety of other ways: in giving priority to education and self-determination (Anna Julia Cooper, 2007); in finding our voice through womanist prose and speeches (Angelou, 1978; Walker, 1983; Lorde, 1984); in developing black feminist thought (Collins, 1990); and in challenging each other through Africana womanism (Hudson-Weems 2004; Ntiri, 2001, Dove, 1998). To add to this, the need for women in the black community to self-identify outside traditional white feminist labels to promote a distinct discourse for the community of black women more widely has been defended stridently (hooks, 2001; Hudson-Weems, 1998). hooks, in particular, points to the position of the black woman in society and the special bond between us and strongly asserts that she had 'not known a life where women had not been together, where women

had not helped, protected and loved one another deeply' (hooks: 2001:37). Community linked with cultural identity thus resonates strongly despite its multiple meanings and ambiguities. Yet, across the African diaspora, and from black feminists in the Caribbean (Andaiye, 2002, Bailey and Leo-Rhynie, 2004), in particular, there is also acknowledgement of the need for critical voices to be heard. However, Caribbean feminist, Barritteau identifies a collective deficit when she asks:

‘Why haven’t Caribbean feminists consciously utilised the theoretical tools of black feminist scholarship? How much do we know about these theoretical contributions? (Barritteau, 2007:10).

If Caribbean women acknowledge this deficit in knowledge and accept it as a part of their oppression, it may also be an acceptance that ‘being oppressed means the absence of choices’ (Bhavnani: 2001: 34). hooks, therefore, encourages us to find our own voices and critically reflect and analyse our place in society because, as black women, our role in the community and, therefore our collective potential, is strong. This is also highlighted in Gregory’s (2001) study of black faculty women where she points out that even in American academies, black women are more likely than other groups to be ‘overburdened with outside responsibilities to the community’ (2001:45). However, Amos and Parmar (1984) warn us that although it is important to draw on the theory and experiences of black women in the US (*and elsewhere*) where significant debate has emerged, black women in Britain need to locate their experiences within the context of what is happening in their own lives.

### **Black women, feminist thought and difference**

Black women’s desire to voice their experiences and collectively organise themselves is articulated through the key sites of motherhood and family, education, employment and community activism (Reynolds: 2005:19).

Individuals play a large part in the construction of knowledge and the language that shapes that construction (Foucault, 1974); and in the lifelong learning discourse, there is undoubtedly an important black feminist perspective to be heard. Collins (2000)

acknowledges that developing black feminist thought involves searching for its expression in alternative institutional locations and among women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals and this highlights a valuable perspective, a lens through which I explore aspects of my research. However, despite the significance of black feminist thought for my work, it has to be understood within a British context. While alternative institutional locations provide important insights into the particular, in parallel, hegemonic voices also construct meanings which we internalise and which affect everyday realities, attitudes to, and experiences of, learning. Therefore, the interpretation of the benefits of lifelong learning for first generation African Caribbean women in Britain will be nuanced by the outcomes of both particular and mainstream influences: not only the distinct ways in which we understand our social world as a result of our lived experiences but also by our intellectual differences. Here, our subjugated knowledge (Foucault, 1980:82) and also our differences allow us particular ways of interpreting and responding to issues impacting on our wider community and ourselves.

Community and identity within this black feminist perspective then speak to both commonalities and differences. Brah (2001: 465) presents four ways in which difference may be conceptualized: difference as experience; difference as a social relation; difference as subjectivity; and difference as identity. In this study, I introduce a further difference, that is, 'difference as oppression' that is often hidden when considering stories, such as those of older black women that have been largely untold. Stanfield (1993:4) reminds us that 'the study of racial and ethnic issues in the social sciences has remained deeply embedded in societal folk beliefs'. Thus, conceptualizations of research problems and interpretations of collected data in racial and ethnic research have often been preceded by a priori ideological and cultural biases that determine the production of apparently objective knowledge. They may also obscure complexities and differences. Willinsky (1998), therefore, encourages us to take steps to avoid the risks of social stereotyping in an effort to avoid the perpetuation of such damaging research in this area. With this in mind, narrative inquiry in this area (Atkinson, 2007, Bach, 2007, Clandinin and Huber, 2010) appears valuable in presenting culturally sensitive data which does not



re-enforce negative social stereotypes but allows a central place for the voices and strengths of research participants.

### **Older black women and the value of education**

In the minds of first generation African Caribbean women, education is valued and perceived as a vital tool (Mirza, 2009) in helping to empower self and others (Bryan et al, 1985). In their study into black Caribbean mothers and their children, both Reynolds (2005) and Abrams (2010) point to the significance placed on education by Caribbean mothers in relation to their children. This is also illustrated in a resolute quote from a Caribbean mother in Barn et al's (2006:6) study, in which she asserts:

Without education you get nowhere in life. That's the main point. I always say to my kids, 'When you go to school, it's for you to learn and not mess about, because when it comes for you to leave school and you've got no education, it doesn't matter if the teachers don't like you, she's not there to be liked, she's there to teach'. I always tell them that. Without education, you get nowhere in life.

For the Caribbean mother, the role of the teacher is sacrosanct (Mirza, 2009; Johnson-Bailey and Alfred, 2006), and education is not only considered vital for her own personal development but also for the survival of her children in contemporary urban society. Such unquestionable support for the role of the tutor, is also endorsed by Alfred (2003), who, in her study of British Caribbean immigrant women found that culture and early socialization from schooling in the country of origin greatly influenced the later learning experiences of the black woman in the host country. In such circumstances, dedication to learning and education was perceived as of primary importance. However, in the UK, the struggle to escape poverty (Platt, 2007) has continued to haunt particular ethnic groups from generation to generation, making dedication to formal learning beyond basic schooling highly problematic in the lives of black women (Goulbourne and Chamberlain, 2001, Reynolds, 2005), in particular. This raises the question of the role open to black women in escaping poverty and linked educational discrimination. Exploring the political and social activism of older black women may shed light on this question but first a

reflection on the theoretical framework for understanding black women's activism is necessary. Black women

have known that their lives in some ways incorporated goals that white middle-class women were striving for, but race and class privilege, of course, reshaped the meaning of those goals profoundly (Smith: 2000:21).

Smith encapsulates the rationale for the growing body of work in black feminist epistemology. Collins (1990) similarly points to the diverse, previously hidden, contributions that black women are able to make to an important area of theoretical development, and argues that in developing black feminist thought:

Understanding the complexity of black women's activism requires understanding, not only of the need to address more than one form of oppression, but the significance of how singular and multiple forms of oppression are organised (Collins, 2000:218).

For older black women, opportunities to participate equitably in learning are likely to be affected by multiple factors as well as sexism, ageism and with negative consequences for educational achievements and later aspirations. In the UK, this intersectionality of: 'race', class, and gender is identified by Carby (1982) and also by Christian (1988), as significant when considering the role and social position of black women in community settings. Collins (1990) theorises multiple layers of black feminist interpretation incorporating black feminism; womanism; Afrocentric feminism; and Africana womanism, which together construct a different reality and a distinct way of gathering information related to the lives of groups of black women. This moves the debate away from the intersectional categories identified by British scholars, which potentially encourages deficit models through their negative connotations. The different reality which Collins (ibid) proposes also opens up the experience of shared cultural identity, emphasising various intersections of multiple, polyrhythmic realities (Sheard, 1996; Alfred, 2002), able to shape the lives of both the researcher and the researched.

‘Polyrhythmic realities’ across black feminist epistemology promote and give voice to an ethic of shared accountability and social responsibility for black women, which Africana womanist theorist Hudson-Weems (2004) states is fundamental in meeting needs in the wider black community. Departing from black feminist thought, at the heart of Africana womanist theory, is the recognition that black feminism should attempt to acknowledge the involvement of black men in a collective struggle to tackle oppression. Hudson-Weems points out that we should refrain from taking our starting point from other feminist commentators and, as black women, we should continually seek to develop our own unique voice in the struggle for gender equality. According to Hudson-Weems, black feminism should be focused on the experiences, struggles, needs and desires of Africana women of the African Diaspora; and prior to considering gender, community or class issues, these must be at the forefront of our struggles. She stresses:

Africana Womanism commands an African-centred perspective of African women’s lives – their historical, current and future interaction with their community (Hudson-Weems, 1998:82).

On the other hand, Collins (2000) highlights the interwoven influence of sexism and racism and advocates black feminist thought as a critical social theory, reflecting power relationships and empowerment. She insists that it is an analysis of a response to injustice which remains at the core of its principles. She concludes that black feminist thought seeks to embrace and address the common oppressions of sexism, racism, sexuality and class and affirms that:

Maintaining the invisibility of Black women and our ideas not only in the United States, but in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, Europe, and other places where Black women now live, has been critical in maintaining social inequalities (Collins: 2000:5).

This led me to consider how black feminist thought could relate to the reality of the lives of black British Caribbean women who arrived in Britain in the 1950s, many of whom came in their early twenties, experiencing exploitation of their labour (Carby, 1982) to build up the economy (Lewis, 2001). Similarly, I reflected on how black feminist thought

relates to those older black women who had ‘a good education back home’ but who ended up in the UK working as cleaners and auxiliary nurses in the National Health Services. The framing and interconnected nature of their racialised and gendered experiences are hard to separate from their wider socio-economic exclusion (Baksh-Sooden, 1994; Reddock, 2007); and the later chapters of this study will draw on both Collins’ and Hudson-Weems’ ideas to help interpret experiences of education and womanist activism amongst such women. Nevertheless, from the discussion above, I would argue that it is important to understand black feminism combined with underlying experiences of oppression and the ability to share and express knowledge of such oppression. I argue that it is through that sharing and knowledge that activism may enable change to take place among a community of black women.

### **Black British feminism: learning, community and class**

In adopting a black feminist standpoint, black British feminism (Mirza, 2007) also places community at the centre of its theoretical lens; and in her study of black Caribbean mothers in the UK, Reynolds (2005:21) notes: ‘To date African-American feminists’ perspectives have dominated the theorisation of black women’s experiences and the production of a black woman’s knowledge’. She calls for a UK based black feminist standpoint theory (Reynolds, 2002) which seeks to position black women at the centre, instead of at the margins, of debate in order that they might assume an active role in (re)naming and (re)defining their own lives. Similar to Collins, Reynolds believes that at the heart of black feminist standpoint theory is the view that there exists a ‘specialised knowledge produced by black women that clarifies a particular standpoint of and about black women’ and that these (potentially multiple) standpoints need better dissemination. As a black British feminist researcher of Caribbean heritage, I seek to uncover such specialised knowledge in the older African Caribbean community to enable older black women to be included in the lifelong learning debate. This shared platform of emerging knowledge comes in many forms, and reflects desires from the earlier struggles (Jones, 1952, Parmar, 1990, Bhavnani, 2001) of black African Caribbean mothers, as depicted in

the extract from Caribbean poet, Jean Binta Breeze, which serves to express the desire to escape from a mundane life.

*Ordinary mawning*

it wasn't no duppy frighten mi  
mek mi jump outa mi sleep  
eena bad mood  
nor no neighbour bring first quarrel  
to mi door  
wasn't de price rise pon bus fare  
an milk an sugar  
was jus anadda  
same way mawning  
anadda clean up de mess  
after dem lef mawning  
a perfectly ordinary  
mawning of a perfectly  
ordinary day  
trying to see a way  
out

(Binta Breeze, 1988:7)

Bryan et al (1985) offer another form of standpoint presentation, reflecting on historical experiences and aspirations in their study of black women's lives in Britain, and point to the roots of such desires for a way out, noting:

Education has always been a burning issue for Black women and viewed in the aftermath of slavery, as virtually the only means for us, and our children to escape the burden of poverty and exploitation, it was regarded in the Caribbean as a kind of liberation (1985:59).

Similarly, in her study of mothering, Reynolds (2005) suggests that learning for black women cannot be understood in isolation from the intersections of race, class, gender and community, and asserts:

The development of the concept of ‘community mothering’ reveals first, the social and collective responsibility Caribbean mothers have for children (and other vulnerable members) in their local community, to whom they are not biologically or legally related (Reynolds, 2005:120).

While both studies focus on the interconnected nature of education, socio-economic and female emancipation, Reynolds stresses the social and communal endeavours, which enable interdependent learning, offering insight into the significance of collective educational aspirations.

While black feminist standpoint theory has highlighted the importance of understanding both a distinctive British perspective and of placing black women at the centre of debates, the work of authors, such as Reynolds, has also drawn criticisms of this theoretical position. For example, in a previous study, Sudbury (1997:29) argued that Black Feminist Standpoint theory promoted divisiveness because it appeared to ascribe superiority of knowledge or insight on the basis of the scale of oppression. Therefore:

dark skinned’ women could claim to be better judges of racism than ‘light skinned’ black women: heterosexual women could be silenced in the light of lesbian women’s assumed insight. (ibid)

These earlier challenges to black feminist standpoint theory in the UK continue and are echoed in contemporary political debates (Taylor et al, 2009). They are also indications of the nature of discussions that might emerge inside older black women’s informal learning spaces, involving both first and second-generation African Caribbean women. Returning to Collins’ (2000) ideas of seeking out knowledge in alternative settings, women involved in informal learning spaces may not be considered intellectuals but such lifelong learning discussions have the potential to influence mind sets by challenging and debating critical issues affecting diverse communities, and provide insights into particular standpoints.

## Chapter conclusion

In outlining a theoretical framework drawn from black feminist epistemologies, I have sought to combine and consider the tensions between black American feminist perspectives and black British feminist standpoints across several decades, examining the distinct thoughts of British commentators. American scholars have been significant in developing thinking in this field, including ideas around shared voice and polyrhythmic realities to which I will return in later discussion. However, for this study, it is important to locate black feminist thought firmly in a UK setting with the aim of exploring and extending insights around a distinct black British womanism, rich in educational desires and with a collective community focused mission.

Individuals play a large part in the construction of knowledge and in the stories presented by first generation African Caribbean women in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, discussions above suggest that there will be an important feminist perspective to be heard. Also drawn from this chapter's discussions, not only feminism but also the interwoven nature (or intersectionality) of a variety of cultural perspectives emerges as critical for this study. As Sheared's (1996) study into 'giving voice to learners' lived experiences' highlights, researchers need to recognise the multiple cultural needs of black women learners, in particular, the variety of social and community settings in which they are actively involved. Women of my mother's generation are proud women and I turn again to the words of Caribbean poet, Ms Lou (Louise Bennett), who provides a constant reminder of the shame to be expected for not pursuing education in the motherland:

Mas Joseph tun-foot nephew,  
 Jane twis-mout gal Ritty,  
 Tata daughter a study fi University.  
 Dem countenance not handsome,  
 Dem station is not gran',  
 Dem clothes a wreck  
 but dem brains can tek education.

Education, education, education,

If yu bright den yuh got de right -- to Education !

(Extract from poem entitled: Education by Louise Bennett -1982:12)



## **Chapter Three: Exploring the Lifelong learning discourse**

### **Introduction: Exploring the academic discourse**

This chapter provides the second theoretical dimensions, which frames my research into the benefits of lifelong learning for first generation African Caribbean women, examining the educational discourse that has helped shape the study. The chapter explores concepts of lifelong learning, discussing the participation of older women and informal learning.

The significance of lifelong learning strategies in the UK and in the European community is also considered alongside policy preoccupations with economic rather than social outcomes from learning. In parallel with other older learners, a focus on economic purposes might impact negatively on older black women whose learning aims are not necessarily to enter the job market or to improve their employment prospects but to participate in learning opportunities as a way of improving the quality of their lives. The chapter considers the benefits of lifelong learning for older learners and their potentially wider effects, questioning the reasons for the absence of specific literature in respect of black and minority ethnic communities, particularly in the light of an ageing black population. In reviewing motivations for learning later in life, debates around social capital and active citizenship are explored, suggesting the potentially important role that lifelong learning might play in tackling social exclusion among older black communities. Existing research conducted with older women learners (Jackson, 2007; Kamler, 2006) is also examined but highlights the limited research on black older learners and older black women in particular. The chapter also points to the rise of interest in informal learning (Jackson, 2007) and the important feminist perspective it presents which also challenges the dominance of the economic dimension to lifelong learning.

Thus, the chapter examines lifelong learning through different lenses, including exploring the ‘seriousness’ attributed to different understandings of lifelong learning both among participants and in the campaigning world. This encompasses the work of organizations, such as the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE), in advocating

a more secure place for lifelong learning in mainstream policy arenas. A wealth of policy initiatives have been promoted around lifelong learning and the most relevant will be discussed as a part of this chapter.

Finally, the chapter turns its attention to the benefits of lifelong learning within the context of an ageing society (McNair, 2007; Withnall, 2000) and to discussion of activity theory (Atchley, 1993), whilst also exploring the kinds of motivations and learning choices that may be relevant to first generation African Caribbean women. Overall, the chapter highlights the absence of detailed empirical studies focusing on lifelong learning and black and minority ethnic women and the lack of related policy, underlining the rationale for this research.

### **Lifelong learning: exploring the concept**

Lifelong learning is a broad and ambiguous concept, embracing education that is flexible, diverse and available at different times and places and pursued throughout life. It has been explored in many different ways, by a number of commentators (Coffield, 2000a; Griffin, 2000; Field, 2000; Mayo, 2000b; Jackson, 2005; Burke and Jackson, 2007), with multiple interpretations. Field suggests that lifelong learning is the ability to learn continually throughout the lifespan (2006:3), which can be defined as dipping into education as and when we like. My research reflects this perspective, understanding learning as a natural and essential but sometimes interrupted by-product of cultural heritage occurring in the social interactions of older matriarchs, determined to renew an innate sense of social justice through education. Jackson describes lifelong learning as taking place in ‘formal and informal educational settings, in the workplace, in community and voluntary organizations, in the home and in families’ (Jackson, 2006:3). This also gives rise to the idea of learning as a continuum, a process that takes place at all levels – formal, non-formal and informal – and utilizing varied models, including distance learning and more conventional approaches. In the UK, lifelong learning is typically understood as including community learning (adult learning, community classes); further education; higher education; libraries, archives and information services, as well as work-based learning. However, that would limit or attach its meaning only to these potentially

concrete settings. There are boundaries and overlaps between a) formal/non-formal/informal learning; b) Freire's differentiation of democratising learning; c) using lifelong learning contexts to fulfil formal 'citizenship' duties or work-related skills; and d) participation in social networks. In the latter, for example, it may well be a question of how the learner engages. I will examine distinctions in these models further later in the chapter.

Lifelong learning, as a concept, has its early roots in adult popular education and in the workers' education movement of the 1970s (Mayo, 2000b). Early commentators attempting to further the concept and develop lifelong learning strategies, which offered adults positive educational opportunities within less formal settings outside the confines of work and welfare, included: Houghton and Richardson (1974); Flude and Parrott (1979); Himmelstrup et al (1981) and Titmuss (1981). These roots and earlier strategies have particular relevance for my study since the type of lifelong learning explored is primarily located within social networks, where learners are interacting with others within voluntary and community organisations and through membership of faith and social groups. In more recent terminology, it may, therefore, be construed as informal learning. Often those participating in informal learning do not recognise that they are engaged in learning activities because learning is primarily regarded as a formal, structured activity that takes place in schools, colleges and universities or on training courses designated for the purpose of acquiring a particular skill (Schuller et al, 1998). In contrast, lifelong learning can be perceived as the on going acquisition of knowledge or skills, based on the idea that learning can and does occur beyond the formal structure of an educational institution and occurs throughout a person's lifetime (Field, 2000). Coupled with this idea is the view that it is never too late for learning, especially learning that acknowledges the wealth of experience and knowledge that older people have to offer (Tuckett and Aldridge, 2007). In parallel, lifelong learning in later years helps to improve the quality of life (Jamieson, 2007).

Lifelong learning rather than education became a guiding concept for the 1990s (Field, 2003), and embraced a range of ideological positions in educational research, reflecting the conceptual diversity as well as the multiple approaches and settings attached to

‘continuous, personal development’ through student centred (self-actualised) learning (Schuller & Field, 1998:67). Field describes lifelong learning as ‘an important new, conceptual framework’ (2006a: 3) which acknowledges constant change and readjustment in the life span alongside skills development. This contrasts with ideas of education and training which assume the one-way transmission of specific knowledge or skills (Freire, 1970), which are often attached to specified time-limited settings.

To add to this, Cropley (1980) had acknowledged a heightened interest in lifelong learning as a concept and claimed that this would continue to grow, even if formal educators ignored it. He explained that ‘lifelong learning does not only take place in formal education but it also entails a life-wide perspective’, emphasising the ‘contribution to learning of people who are not trained, paid or acknowledged as teachers’ (1980:3). He proposed a definition of learning as ‘a process of change occurring within people as a result of experience’ (ibid) suggesting a reflexivity in individuals’ lifelong learning, which not only ‘lasts a lifetime’ but also involves ‘the whole range of influences that people encounter in the course of living their life’ (Cropley, 1980:2).

### **Lifelong learning: reflexive individualisation**

Lifelong learning both reflects and supports patterns of behaviour that are now deemed widespread, including ‘reflexive individualisation’ – viewed by social scientists as a central part of thinking in modern society (Giddens, 1991), a society where we must depend on our individual resources and knowledge in order to make choices about who we are and how we behave. In ‘late modernity’ and in a world where traditional social structures have given way to more individualised or isolated existences, lifelong learning, then, can reflect and support social and individual needs. However, community contexts, which facilitate informal learning may counter these individualising tendencies and encourage mutuality. For women, reflexive individualisation typically depicts their move from structured traditional roles (Giddens, 1990), with expectations of looking after the home and family, to a ‘risk’ society (Beck, 1992), where they may have multiple choices but must draw on their own individualised resources to resolve these. In these self-reliant contexts, learning often becomes crucial to making sense of potential opportunities but in

some circumstances may also lead to a wider collective or critical consciousness of their social conditions (Freire, 1970).

In Chapter 1, I introduced the interconnected nature of informal learning and voluntary action, and Hustinx and Lammertyn (2000:30) note that ‘individualisation is considered the most dangerous threat to volunteering, eliminating the remaining solidarity among citizens’, apparently reflecting recent government rhetoric on the need to restore associational life by creating a Big Society (PASC, 2011). Hustinx and Lammertyn (2000:32) argue that volunteering has become predominantly self-interested, stating that: ‘Nowadays willingness to participate in volunteer work is no longer dependent on social needs but on personal interests and experiences’. They stress the individual rather than collective motivations to participate and the consequent gains anticipated in skills or personal rewards (Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2000:35).

In later research, they describe how voluntary activity has shifted away from ideas of mutuality and collective social responsibility and point out that:

The reflexive volunteer model represents individuated forms of commitment, in which the focus shifts to the volunteer as an individual actor. The structural and individual reflexivity typical for the late modern volunteering context is reflected in the progressive weakening of collectively established identities and life courses. As a result, volunteering is no longer naturally inscribed in collective patterns of behaviour (Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2003:172).

In a world where unpaid internships and volunteer positions are growing as a means to access the learning, skills and experience for employment among younger generations (Rochester and Thomas, 2006), it raises the question of whether older generations have sustained less individually motivated roles in voluntary and community activities. In the case of older black women, and older volunteers (Rochester et al., 2010), willingness to participate in voluntary action may lie in an urge to tackle social injustice at a local level, coupled with a desire to interact with other like-minded people. In the way that Freire (1999) identifies politics, education and struggles for liberation as interwoven, such voluntary or community action contexts may well re-kindle aspirations for further

learning and in turn, increased activism (Rochester, 2013), as women move from an individualised volunteer model to joining others in collective activities of wider benefit to others.

According to Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003), the third and most alarming implication of this transition towards an individualised volunteer model is the growing exclusion of less privileged population groups from contemporary volunteer positions. The ideal-typical construct of reflexive volunteerism creates a universe of ‘clever volunteers’ (Giddens, 1994: 94), who are fully capable of matching individual biographical profiles with appropriate volunteer opportunities. Such volunteers actively pursue personal interests and dispose of substantial educational, professional and organizational qualifications to meet the standards of highly specialized volunteer activities (Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2003:183). In this way volunteer opportunities become more competitive, and in parallel with ways that qualification levels for entry to employment are raised disproportionately to the needs of jobs (Dore, 1980). This in turn, excludes potentially able volunteers who have fewer marketable resources to offer. In addition, volunteering, as a concept, is re-shaped conceptually from activist to instrumental activity, marginalising significant aspects of informal, social and mutual activities. Many people may also participate in valuable acts of engagement, including helping friends and neighbours at informal levels but those are excluded from formally recognised acts of citizenship or volunteer activities because they fail to conform to particular models (Lister, 2007; Milbourne, 2009).

### **Social models of lifelong learning discourse**

I now turn to consider five social models of lifelong learning discourse, the first of which is described as a deficit model of lifelong learning. Here, inadequacies in achievements are inappropriately blamed on individual failures rather than on economic and social inequalities (Burke and Jackson, 2007). If individuals have assimilated this explanation and blame themselves for past failures in education, they are likely to continue to experience barriers through lack of confidence if they seek to learn later in life. This understanding also separates the social from the individual in the learning process, and encourages learners to accept prescribed knowledge rather than valuing their own

experiences or questioning these prescribed definitions. Effectively, control resides in ownership of knowledge (Young, 1971).

The second model, a social justice model of lifelong learning, acknowledges a citizen's involvement in the lifelong learning discourse and is defined by Doukas (2002: 282) as 'learning through all aspects of life, so that each citizen has the opportunity to acquire the necessary knowledge for personal development, social and professional enhancement, to become an active participant in society and the economy' and to promote wider access and social justice through such means. This model acknowledges the individual's appreciation of the full and wider benefits of learning and the barriers that different groups face. The model best describes the nature of learning for personal development, which underpins the kind of programmes available at the WEA<sup>7</sup> (Workers' Educational Association) and at Ruskin College<sup>8</sup> for women and working class communities. These are programmes intended to widen participation but the focus is largely on providing access to opportunities, overcoming past qualification barriers and individualised achievements, and may fail to address underlying inequalities.

The third model is identified as a social innovation model of lifelong learning. Here, Bostrom (2002) describes a model, which promotes socio-economic transition and democratization through social stimuli. In this model, lifelong learners are able to develop new thinking by interacting with each other over a period of time, potentially reflecting Freire's (1974) concept of learning for critical consciousness through social engagement. This is best described in the skills and confidence based learning that, for example, members of local regeneration boards, such as in the New Deal for Communities, have accessed when working at a local level and involved in

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7 The UK's largest voluntary-sector provider of adult education - founded in 1903, in order to support the educational needs of working men to enable them to access further or higher education.

8 Founded in 1899, the college aimed to provide university education for working class people. Founders understood that education is power and helps transform individual lives and societies.

recommending changes to improve their local area. Barnes et al (2007) also describe people engaging as more active citizens through learning participation skills in different consultative and community based projects; and this model is also reflected in the 'learning for active citizenship' programmes promoted during the earlier new Labour years. As Mayo and Annette (2010) highlight, there are differences in how such models are played out and some models may serve government agendas through promoting 'good citizens' while others genuinely build greater critical awareness of democratic participation: activist rather than simply active citizens.

Fourthly, lifelong learning can be identified as a form of social movement (Jarvis, 2007:42). Such a model recognises the dynamic and collective outcomes of individuals coming together in shared learning and change activities. For older black women in an ageing society, involvement of this type can be seen where there is an urgent need to address social concerns around them, and this may be reflected among other population groups. In the context of older black women, it can be said that they are beginning to reconsider a 'lost role, beyond the home' (Etienne and Jackson, 2010), and in such situations, learning is considered an integral part of meaningful social participation. The extent to which this social participation extends to become a 'movement' depends on contexts, stimuli and spaces for action and the resulting collective awareness of participants (Crowther, 2004), and will be explored further later in the study.

The final model is described by Griffin (2000) as a socially progressive movement, which differs from the previous model in that it contains a much more explicit concept of social and institutional change.

In clarifying this definition, Griffin asks:

If the policy of lifelong learning can be counted among such developments... the question arises as to whether or not it is a socially progressive movement, or whether it poses a threat to public education systems and thus to their role in promoting access and equal opportunities (Griffin:2000:7).



Public education systems have conversely, also undermined equitable access and outcomes in education and reproduced gendered and racialised roles and expectations (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Reay et al, 2001). Outside public education systems, lifelong learning has the potential to provide ‘second’ and ‘third’ chances and to deliver increased access for particular groups in the population. However, it is less clear how it can contribute to more fundamental changes to the barriers that currently exclude certain groups from educational and socio-economic achievements, a question that I carry forward in my study.

Examining these different models, therefore, gives rise to key questions for my study in relation to the role that lifelong learning can play both in offering access to learning and in empowering older learners who have faced discrimination in their prior education at a number of levels. The final two models also open for discussion the extent to which learning, coupled with social participation, constructs collective activities and critical consciousness, producing not only social and institutional changes but also redressing fundamental inequities.

### ***Women and learning in the community***

Schuller and Watson’s (2009) study confirms that one of the most striking trends in participation in adult learning is the international phenomenon that, over the last 10-15 years, women have overtaken men in educational achievement at all levels and in almost every subject across most OECD countries. The same study also found that men are more likely to learn at work or independently, while women are more likely to learn within either publicly funded or community facilities. However, minority ethnic women, especially those in older age groups, are not distinguished in the data. The implication from the data is that publicly funded and community provision has gendered implications and it also has implications for the relationship between gender and age. Women in their forties and older belong to the cohort before the occurrence of dramatic increases in women’s levels of qualifications, and are both more in need and less likely to participate in adult learning (Jones, 2010). There are also a series of barriers which can be identified as hindering older adults from participating in adult learning, ranging from cost,

accessibility and information about opportunities; to the appropriateness of provision, in terms of content, pace and cultural relevance of the offer (Jones, 2010).

Increasing educational participation has long been seen as a major factor in achieving greater social equality and in improving wider societal participation (Schuller, 2000). For example, Hills et al (2010: 393) identified that ‘low income acts as a barrier to post compulsory education’, and is in turn likely to contribute to perpetuating social exclusion. However, in much of this research around social mobility, inclusion and exclusion, older black women are invisible. There are multiple layers to be uncovered to gauge the extent to which this group is a part of those overtaking men in overall educational achievements in the area of adult learning.

Much learning for older black women can be seen in informal settings and Cullen et al (2000) note that informal learning is widening participation in two senses. By participating in informal and community settings, older black women can also play a valuable role in removing perceived barriers to learning for others: if they can benefit successfully, so can younger generations. However, as Hills et al (2010) argue, low income and poverty play a significant role in preventing educational participation, and Platt (2007) has uncovered high levels of poverty amongst Britain’s black and minority ethnic communities, producing barriers to particular types of learning. Nevertheless, informal learning settings are often less visible and, despite low income, Maynard’s (2003:15) research into women from different ethnic and economic backgrounds revealed a growing number of women, ‘more positive and clearly wishing to play an important role in tackling social exclusion and in developing the world around them’. For first generation African Caribbean women in my study, the extent and nature of this enthusiasm and participation will be explored in the chapters to follow.

### **Lifelong learning as informal learning**

Field (2006a) refers to informal learning as the type of lifelong learning that is self-directed and undertaken by individuals in the course of their daily lives (Field: 2006a: 5). Similarly, Morgan-Klein and Osborne (2007: 14) describe informal learning as ‘learning

that either takes place outside of institutions' or is defined by some other element of 'informality', such as non-certified learning, contrasting it with the trend to certificate informal or community-based learning. The authors go on to argue that 'we need to pay more attention to the social nature of learning situations and the social processes involved, rather than simply to formal pedagogy and content' (ibid: 14).

Women form a significant proportion of the older population in Britain (ONS, 2012), and it is becoming clear that policy makers, focused on improving community cohesion, can learn from their experiences of successful informal learning practices (Jackson, 2006), which have often been linked to efforts to improve local communities. In her work on the National Federation of Women's Institutes, Jackson (2006) describes a particular type of lifelong learning which dominates the lives of members of the women's institutes – namely informal learning. Here, for older women, this learning plays a powerful and cohesive role within social settings and helps to improve confidence and the quality of older women's lives. Adshead and Jamieson (2001) suggest that older women who learn together establish mutual friendships that foster good relations more widely. Similarly, Kamler's (2006) longitudinal Australian study, of the stories of older women, between the ages of 60-85 shows ageing as positive change rather than a decline or deterioration in the quality of life. Older women with opportunities to improve the quality of their lives are, therefore, able to broaden their horizons and make meaningful choices (Jackson, 2006). Whilst these studies enhance insights into the meanings of lifelong learning for older women, few have explicitly focused on minority ethnic women. Equally, the five social models of lifelong learning referred to earlier, I would argue point to debates in this area of study, which needs development to broaden the academic discourse around informal learning and older women.

Other studies in lifelong learning show that participating in informal learning has been linked to increased levels of practical community association, such as involvement with tenants' boards, engagement as school governors and wider grassroots action, positively encouraging citizenship (Crick Report 2000; Jackson, 2007; Annette and Mayo, 2009). Such activities can lead to greater political awareness and growing critical consciousness (Freire, 1999), as well as a heightened sense of moral responsibility and respect for the

law – themes promoted in the Big Society agenda (Coalition Government, 2010). Given the increased interest in lifelong and, in particular, informal learning as means of shaping welfare behaviours (Milbourne, 2013), it is not surprising to find that these issues have been linked at policy level to previous UK community and social initiatives, such as neighbourhood renewal and community engagement (Mayo, 2000a; Taylor and Doyle, 2003). For older black and minority ethnic women, informal learning may be significant at an individual and wider community level with clear links between learning and voluntary action; but, despite constantly changing initiatives, it is questionable whether such learning has been given the priority it warrants in an ageing multi-cultural society.

Informal learning forms an important and integral part of lifelong learning (Cropley, 1980), and in the context of older learners in the third (50-75) and fourth (over 75) ages, can best be described as the type of learning that takes place in social networks, through ‘membership of voluntary networks and organisations of various kinds, where individuals and groups pursue the things that interest them’ (Field: 2006a: 166). This sense of the importance of engaging in areas of interest rather than what is prescribed by community leaders or others is echoed in an extract from a poem by Caribbean poet and novelist, Merle Collins:

We speak, not to agitate you  
but in spite of your agitation  
because we are workers  
peasants, leaders’ you see  
and were not born  
to be your vassals

*‘Because the dawn breaks’* (Collins, 1985)

Speaking, ‘not to agitate’, resonates with the spirit of first generation African Caribbean women volunteering in their communities and learning for the benefit of the community in a variety of grassroots organisations (Dadzie, 1993a). Recent experiences, however,

show the range of informal learning activities declining in a context where adult and community learning centres are experiencing greatly reduced resources (Milbourne, 2013). Yet informal (and self-organised) learning may have a vital role to play, demonstrating creative and challenging pedagogies, and potentially introducing new opportunities, if sections of the learning population previously ignored are to flourish in an ageing society.

### **An ageing society: the role of lifelong learning**

As a starting point to this discussion, a NIACE discussion paper entitled ‘Demography and Adult Learning’ (McNair, 2007) has highlighted the potential for improving the health and life expectancy of a nation, where there are larger numbers of people in retirement and a higher proportion of people from minority ethnic backgrounds (increasing from 8% in 2000 to 18% by 2040). McNair (2007:7) stressed: ‘We expect a lifelong learning society to continue: we can expect growing numbers of people, mainly between 75-100 – many very active, but dependent on support for some aspects of daily life’.

The UK Government’s Opportunity Age Strategy paper, published in 2005, similarly emphasised the importance of an appropriate policy response to the growing numbers of people in the third age. Successful initiatives highlighted in both policy and research include the Better Government for Older People programme (BGOP) which ran from 1998 and was a unique partnership between central and local government, the voluntary sector, the academic community and older people. It aimed to improve public services for older people by better meeting their needs – including their learning needs – whilst working with a wide cross-section of individuals and organisations (Hayden and Boaz, 2000). More initiatives of this kind may be required in the future in order to meet the needs of diverse groups of ageing elders; and illustrate that innovation in lifelong (informal) learning involving older people has the potential to benefit wider communities. Initiatives such as BGOP had the potential to generate significant improvements for Britain’s ageing communities, and women may have a key role to play (Maynard et al, 2008) both as participants and organisers. In respect of older women, in 2008, the Office

for National Statistics (ONS, 2012) compared the likelihood of living to age 75 and found that survival chances had increased from 66% to 77% for women in England and Wales. Studies demonstrating that women are increasingly living longer than men (Dunnell, 2008), and are improving the quality of their own lives, as well as those around them. For example, Maynard et al (2008:3) pointed out that: ‘Older women outnumber older men, since men tend to die at a younger age than women’, highlighting ways that women may contribute socially as widows. However, McNair (2009:16) noted ‘that the effect of gender on life expectancy is diminishing’, although, ‘women still heavily outnumber men in the 80+ population’.

McNair’s research also identifies ‘far more people in the “third age”, with most people spending a much larger share of their lives in potentially healthy and active retirement, which lasts for much longer’ (McNair, 2009:9). For older black women, as explored in later chapters, participating in learning activities is likely to stand them in good stead for longer, happier lives, and in the context of this research, the elderly BME population in the UK is similarly projected to grow. In 2007, there were 675,000 over-65s from BME groups, a figure, which is projected to rise to 810,000 in 2016, 1.3m in 2026 and 3.8m in 2051 – a more than fivefold increase in around forty years (Lievesley, 2010:59).

The first quarter of the 21st century may see, for the first time in human history, a society in which most people in developed countries will spend a third of their lives in (relatively healthy) ‘retirement’, although recent changes in pensionable ages and the effects of austerity measures on longer term health and nutrition could see this balance changing. McNair (ibid) indicated that we are now experiencing a major, and historically unprecedented, growth in the numbers of people in retirement. For the generation now in its 50s and 60s and their children, the third age is unlikely to be a few years of relaxation before the onset of ill health and death, but a substantial life phase, without two of the major features of traditional adult life: paid employment and child-raising responsibilities. In examining an equitable platform for lifelong learning policy, these changing social and demographic contexts have a significant bearing.

In respect to learning and the third age and beyond Laslett (1989) describes the third age as a time to pursue personal interests and an opportunity for greater autonomy following on from the second age priorities of career and child rearing. In the third age, plans are made for the future, and past expectations of post-retirement are often rejected. Ardelt (2000) refers to the importance of intellectual knowledge at this time, coupled with the power of learning in later years (Carlton and Soulsby, 1999), implying power gained both by the learner and a wider society. According to NIACE, learning in later life contributes to physical and mental health and well-being and is associated with improved self-confidence and increased community activity (NIACE, 2006). Lifelong learning, therefore, can make a useful contribution in maintaining health and preventing the isolation, loneliness and social exclusion that older people may experience as they age and lose family members or friends.

However, current welfare frameworks do not provide adequately for the growing needs of older people (Crosby, 2004) and there is a need for a rebalancing of policy by age to account for changing demography. Education is often viewed, as an added value for older people among welfare policies rather than making a significant contribution to welfare needs. Policy needs to include a clearer recognition that learning needs to continue throughout life, and that our historic concentration of policy attention and resources on young people may be irrational when faced with the growing demands of an ageing society. There is a 'particular urgency' in a climate of reduced resources to review the distribution of learning between the four major phases of life (McNair, 2009:10) if we are to make the best use of human, physical and welfare resources.

Activity theory (Atchley, 1993) is also closely related to how the lives of older people can benefit from learning. It is often applied to the study of age and older people, and views later life as a time of potential individual growth and renewed social relationships, with life satisfaction deriving from social interaction and active participation. Consequently, the post-work period can be a positive, creative and busy time. However, this relies on traditional ideas of work-life structure; and Atchley (1993:9) attributes older people's particular ways of coping and well-being in later years to the preferences and competencies most have identified in middle age that have led to satisfying results.

Alongside these, lifelong learning can play an effective role in enhancing and supporting motivation, both building on these competencies and strengths, and supporting necessary adjustments. In adapting to ageing, Atchley (1993) argues that people attempt to preserve and maintain long-standing patterns of thought and behaviour that are important to them and help to support their identities and well-being. In other words, when faced with adaptive challenges, people tend to rely on what they see as their established strengths. Furthermore ‘development is most likely to occur in activities that are already preferred and in which the individual already has some knowledge and competence’ (ibid, 1993:6). This supports earlier discussion that a lack of previous education may present a barrier to learning and well-being in later life, and is likely to prevent access to formal settings, exacerbating inequalities of opportunity. Informal learning, as explored in this study, therefore may have a useful role to play in improving lives in an older population, especially among those, such as older black populations, many of whom may have had poor experiences of earlier formal education.

NIACE, as a campaigning organisation, welcomed efforts made by the previous Labour government (DfES, 2003b; DWP, 2005) to construct a coherent strategy around the need to enhance the quality of life for older people, including through extending learning supported through public education systems (Soulsby, 2000). However, it also identified much more that could be done. As publicly funded education resources become scarcer, it accentuates questions about recent commitments to follow through such aspirations or to include those previously marginalised from public education achievements.

### **Social capital, social exclusion and the benefits of lifelong learning**

Education and community participation strategies have been regarded as significant in approaches to tackling social exclusion (Sen, 2000), reinforcing the significance of links between learning and community participation. As Clayton explains:

Involvement with community organisations, tenants’ associations, women’s centres and so on. These can help to reach people with little contact with officialdom. In addition, part of the value of using local people, including those



who themselves are members of socially excluded groups, is that this enables their voice to be heard: they can make their own expert input (Clayton, 2000:6).

However, critics have also argued that while community groups may reach and include people who are marginalised, voices of individuals and small groups often remain excluded in relation to formal structures and officials (Taylor, 2003; Brent, 2009; Milbourne, 2009). As Colley et al (2002:1) note, arguing a role for lifelong learning opportunities integral to active citizenship:

We cannot learn without belonging [to something] and we cannot belong without learning the practices, norms, values and understandings of the community that we belong to.

Jackson's work (2005:193) highlights the diverse range of settings where over one and a half million learners in Britain between the ages of 50 and 75 participate in learning, including: the University of the Third Age; the WEA (Workers Education Association) and organisations such as the National Federation of Women's Institutes. Along with local community centres and associations established around special interests, which also contribute multiple contexts for learning and social participation, the diversity of settings illustrates the multiple ways that informal learning can play a part in tackling exclusions. In Britain, there are also over 15,000 black and ethnic minority organisations (Jones, 2010), many locally based, and older black women are likely to have some significant involvement in these settings.

First generation African Caribbean women volunteering as carers and community workers can play a key role in helping to develop strong local social networks (Bryan et al, 1985). However, little is known about the role that older black women play as learners and participants in tackling social exclusion and isolation in an ageing society. In 2000, Field declared lifelong learning as: 'partly emancipation, partly coercion but always present and always influential' (2000: 22), suggesting the interrelatedness but also the tensions between education, community and citizens. Education and community settings offer access to wider resources, and in this context, social capital, as defined by Field and Spence (2000:32) as 'the existence of networks, norms and levels of trust that

promote collective action between members of a given social grouping'. This is increasingly significant in the lives of older people at risk of isolation but while access to these opportunities and shared networks is important, the potential for emancipatory activities, which Field (ibid) suggests, has greater possibilities.

By contrast, Campbell and McLean (2002:3) show that the

construction of ethnic identities – within a context of institutionalised racism – both the material and symbolic levels – makes it unlikely that people will view local community organisations or networks as representative of their interests and needs.

Belonging and social networks, like community (Brent, 2009) are therefore both inclusive and exclusive, and there need then, to be levels of trust, shared interests and networks to enable inclusive and potentially emancipatory activities to develop. Learning contexts which assume a deficit model of social capital or where embedded norms and cultures habitually exclude others will offer little to extend opportunities to wider social groupings.

Jackson (2006), in her study of lifelong learning and women's institutes, suggests that the WI women appear to occupy an almost exclusively 'middle class habitus' where social networks can be seen to be inclusive of some and marginalise others (Jackson, 2006:78). The powerful nature of possessing and sharing certain forms of social capital and the operation of social networks are mechanisms for exclusion and control (Field, 2000c), benefiting WI members but creating institutionalised inequalities, which exclude other groups of older women learners. According to Putnam (2000), when trust and social networks flourish, individuals, neighbourhoods and even nations prosper but this view is challenged by research which examines micro-level engagement, such as Jackson's (ibid) and also Brent's work (2009), which highlights competing community interests that create insiders and outsiders in community organisations. Mayo (2000a), like Field (2000), asserts the negative, as well as positive connotations of social capital, demonstrating how use or access to certain forms of social capital can reproduce social inequalities since those with better social resources and networks can build on these, potentially leaving others behind.

Schuller et al (2004) also describe how people who engage in learning are more likely to be active citizens; and Mayo (2002) highlights the increasing interest in developing connections between lifelong learning and community capacity building, whereby so-called deficits in bridging social capital can be 'remedied'. She argues that 'policies for the development of social capital have been linked with strategies to combat social exclusion and facilitate wider processes of democratic renewal' (2002: 198). However, as Garmanikow and Green (1999) also stress, such policies often discount the value of bonding social capital among different social and cultural groups and invariably assume deficits in social capital or resources among poorer or less advantaged neighbourhoods. In this way they avoid the structural or institutional analyses for assumed lack of cultural resources, which can, therefore, be remedied by individual and community agency (Milbourne, 2002).

For Britain's diverse communities, recent strategies intended to tackle community cohesion may offer benefits in developing resources to strengthen the mechanisms which, promote bridging social capital (Field, 2005) but they may also disregard existing bonds and networks, which may be less visible to outsiders. They may, as Mayo (2000:204) notes 'provide more detailed inputs', and 'enable the so far missing voices of black and ethnic minority participants to be heard'. However, the hegemonic nature of many social inclusion interventions has been criticised for exerting pressures to conform to dominant models of participation and behaviour in mainstream society (Lister 1997; Levitas, 2006). Thus, the idea of building social capital in diverse neighbourhoods frequently implies a deficit model of alternative approaches and cultures that may exist there (Milbourne, 2009), whereas the social networks and experiences emerging from community learning at local levels may be rich but sit more comfortably outside a middle class habitus.

This leads me to question the apparently inclusive rhetoric in lifelong learning policies and whether they have failed to tackle either excluded groups or the concerns around inclusions and exclusions referred to above, which closely relate to my area of study.

### **Inclusive lifelong learning policy**

Griffin's (1999:440) study of lifelong learning and welfare reform noted: 'The strategy of governments is to create the conditions in which people, families, communities and organisations are most likely to learn for themselves, thus obviating the need for education policy in the traditional sense'. 'Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> century', also known as the Fryer Report (1997) similarly recommended that creating a learning culture for all was desirable, identifying the need for a vision for the future and a clear agenda. While it is significant that public policy has sought to address the importance of lifelong learning, there are inevitably gaps between policy intentions and its interpretation and implementation (Milbourne et al, 2003). While the Fryer Report recognised implementation problems that needed to be overcome, and promised: equity and diversity; quality and flexibility; that people would come before structures; that there would be a shared responsibility; and high levels of government involvement, much of this remained what it was: rhetorical. It recalled the utopian visions of the learning society, from the 1919 Ministry of Reconstruction report on adult education onwards but left a limited legacy. Additionally, as it remained aspirational rather than engaging with tangible implications, it failed to address what inclusive approaches might mean in practice.

The 'Higher Education in the Learning Society' (1997) sought to offer opportunities later in life to those who had missed them earlier. This was followed by: 'The Learning Age' (1998) and 'Learning to Succeed' (1999) reports which proposed a new framework for post-16 learning. Coffield (2000) stated that within two years of coming into office, the New Labour government had introduced 23 government initiatives in lifelong learning. In 2002, 'Success for all' was concerned with raising standards and transforming local delivery in learning and skills provision and, despite the focus on celebrating older learners, most of these policy documents were still dominated by rhetoric around skills for workforce modernisation. The subsequent white paper on 'The Future of Higher Education' (2005) opened up discussion on interaction between businesses, community, and the higher education sector highlighting ways in which community based interests and influences could help to widen participation in higher education. The Leitch Report

(2006), despite noting the growing age profile among the UK population, concentrated on skills for employment, largely disregarding the needs of older learners. Separating lifelong learning from the skills development agenda is problematic as the two became jointly embedded in aspirations through a decade of policy documents, and as Griffin (2000) observed, it may be better to think of lifelong learning as a strategy to extend education spheres rather than as a set of policies. In either case they contain both gaps and contradictions.

The need to influence strategies emerging from policy aspirations is evident and the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) continues to be influential in engaging critically in policy campaigns helping to highlight deficits. More recently, NIACE (2007b) headed a national strategy for the future of lifelong learning in an effort to raise the political profile of lifelong learning and help set new policy directions. It achieved some influence, and a subsequent government consultation document on adult and informal learning (DIUS, 2008) referred back to McGivney's (1999) well received, earlier categorisation of informal learning in the community as arising from: 'the activities and interests of individuals and groups, but which may not be recognised as learning' because of its location outside a conventional learning environment.

The same government consultation paper (DIUS, 2008) asked: 'How can we do better in ensuring that no one is excluded from the benefits of learning?' – suggesting a better recognition of deficits resulting from previous policies. However, as Hodgson (2000:53) noted earlier,

Although there have been wider debates about how lifelong learning can help to transform societies, debates about, and policies for, widening participation in lifelong learning have largely revolved around the role of the individual in relation to educational opportunities.

This echoes criticisms of different models and concepts discussed above that the tendency is to focus either on the individual benefits of lifelong learning or a deficit model of individuals or groups in need of education. There are, however, valuable

criticisms of the ways that policy in this area is conceived and enacted. Schuller's (2009) inquiry into the future for lifelong learning and its effects on poverty brought together diverse themes considered in earlier sections of this chapter. The inquiry found that opportunities for older people to learn are diminishing and concluded that 'unfair rules on funding and conflicting government policies are holding back efforts to provide education to people of all ages' (Fearn, 2009). Following a further white paper (DIUS, 2009), this time stressing informal learning and its importance for older learners, Schuller and Watson (2009) were able to welcome its emphasis on the right to learn through life as a basic human right and its introduction of different models to address four key life-course stages stretching to over 75. However, despite innovative models and emphasis on extended and informal learning, few of these developments through the Labour years explicitly addressed the needs of an older black population, nor the ways that education can exclude such learners.

### **Lifelong learning: preoccupation with the economic dimensions**

Among criticisms discussed above is the predominance in policy documents of learning strategies related to economic and employment outcomes and the relative absence of discussion around informal learning. This absence is also reflected in national targets for educational participation, and according to Gorard (2000), therefore, readily ignored by all of us as immeasurable. Griffin, (2000) argues that in a society dominated by free market economy, effective education and welfare policies cannot be developed. Over a long period, research has debated ways that public education systems advantage and disadvantage different groups of learners but there is little history of research, which differentiates those advantaged or disadvantaged from lifelong learning (Griffin, 2000). The policy discourse of lifelong learning presents it as an extension of learning opportunities, but not always as the expansion of publicly funded provision. As nation states adopt a neo-liberal and market-oriented stance towards the provision of all kinds of public services, is lifelong learning to be another example of privatised or alternatively voluntary, self-help provision? If this is, indeed, the direction, then the consequences for access and equal opportunities in extended education settings prompt serious concerns. On the one hand, the redistributive and arbitration roles of local governments in

allocating resources are lost; and on the other, volunteer resources and voluntary action are sparser in poorer areas (Milbourne, 2013). As Griffin (2000:5) also argues, markets reinforce and reproduce inequalities.

One of the ways that resources for lifelong learning have been rationalised is through its potential to support economically useful outcomes, including through skills for employment and wider economic growth. As Field (2000c: 25) notes,

in Britain and most other advanced nations, lifelong learning policies are mostly driven by a desire to raise the nation's economic competitiveness and improve its standard of living, defined in largely material terms.

Yet, from earlier discussion, it is clear that many of those seeking to learn later in life include first generation African Caribbean women and others who aspire to learn for non-economic reasons. Despite the potential drawbacks of this narrow perspective on lifelong learning, Field (2000), connecting the concept of reflexive individualism with economic outcomes, argues that in a knowledge-based economy, those who have the lowest levels of skill and little access to update knowledge are less and less likely to find paid employment. This has been borne out in more recent times. In arguing for a broader perspective, however, it is important not to lose sight of this important economic dimension of returning to study; and as policy shows, the economic emphasis can readily dominate and render other perspectives invisible. Thompson (2001:9) underlines that:

The preoccupation with economic rather than social outcomes leads to an emphasis on work-related training, participation rates and qualifications rather than on the wider, social purposes of learning.

However, there are also different ways of understanding the worth of workplace learning (Fuller et al, 2005). In the workplace, to name a few of these: lifelong learning is a concept of continuous personal development through student-centred (self-actualized) learning; builds social and participatory practices; encourages continuing education, including in company schemes; and is an essential means of accelerating assimilation of new technologies (Brine, 2006). The understanding of lifelong learning linked to a

continuing process learning and updating is pervasive because it is not restricted to learning that is somehow intentional and structured (Tuijnman, 1999); and activities outside work such as ‘being involved in community committee work; attending a gym are cited as learning activities and their outcomes can be audited and utilized’ for funding purposes (Preston: 2006: 162).

Rubenson and Beddie (2004:166) assert that

Lifelong learning promised to continue the renewal process of knowledge, skills and values, throughout life and humanistic proponents of lifelong learning claimed it would promote a better society and quality of life, and would allow people to adapt to and control change.

However, much of the rhetoric surrounding or appearing to rationalise lifelong learning contains contrary messages. Jesson and Newman point out that ‘as we consider adult learning within the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are confronted by slogans like “knowledge economy”, “information society”, “continuous learning”, “intellectual property”, “the learning organisation” and “knowledge assets”’ (Jesson and Newman, 2004:252). In theory, the various ideals of lifelong learning as discussed earlier in this chapter (Field and Leicester, 2000; Coffield, 1997) that it should be open to all generations throughout their lives, drawing on the theme of continuous or continual learning, persist. However, more often than not, the aspects most promoted by policy makers are geared towards employment and frequently focus on vocational learning or specific short-term skills for those aged between 18 and 30, leaving others, and in the context of this study, first generation African Caribbean women, absent from the discourse.

### **Lifelong learning, skills for employment and the European Community**

In 1995, the Commission of the European Communities (CEC) produced a white paper entitled: Towards a Learning Society (CEC:1995), which declared 1996 as European Year of lifelong learning. In Europe, the main impetus for the promotion of lifelong learning came from the United Nations Educational, Scientific Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)



and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In parallel, Delor's White paper on Competition and Economic Growth (CEG 1994) focused on lifelong learning as its cornerstone. Thus, lifelong learning, employment skills and economic growth were closely allied both in European and UK policies.

From earlier discussions, it is clear that there have also been broader concerns but as Field (2006:3) argues, reviewing nearly a decade of policy, much of the interest in lifelong learning has been occupied with a narrow agenda, namely 'the development of a more productive and efficient workforce'. This has largely discounted the acquisition of new ideas and developmental learning. Field notes that the phrase lifelong learning has become – not only in Europe but in several other nations – convenient political shorthand for the modernisation of education and training systems (2006a) and their application at different and appropriate points during working lives. Preston (2006:162) also observes that the aim of monitoring initiatives such as RARPA (Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement) has been to bring the non-formal aspects and benefits of learning into the domain of auditing and inspection. Yet informal learning processes are not predisposed to measurable audit. Further, the 'self-directed' nature of informal learning in the community distinguishes it from the apparently less formal lifelong learning that is associated with workplace settings, where individual learning may appear to be self-directed but is often 'employer directed' with benefits accrued mainly for the employer, unless stronger learning communities can be established (Fuller et al, 2005).

### **Towards a fairer policy for lifelong learning**

My exploration of the lifelong learning literature reveals that failures in earlier strategies have drawn numerous responses to the need to develop broader policies for lifelong learning, and following the NIACE Commission of Inquiry (McNair, 2007) presented some initial proposals. These included: 'rebalancing the curriculum: to support individuals who will be spending a much longer period of their lives in active retirement'. McNair also called for 'a significant expansion of programmes and activities which support a maintenance of social networks' for older learners as well as strategies to

support social cohesion through encouraging ‘interaction between different groups and communities’ (ibid: 9).

Such commentary highlights a significant recognition of the need to join up learning and community action. However, through funding streams, targets and monitoring, the government has often retained control (Griffin, 2000), shaping learning outcomes towards employability, human resource development and technological accreditation. Alternatively, in the case of older learners, such outcomes can prioritise social inclusion or active citizenship (Griffin, 2000) in ways that deny alternative cultures. These schemes appear more valuable but even where quality of the learning process is considered, are invariably monitored by proxy measures since social impacts are notoriously difficult to measure (Baker et al, 2011). In the context of an ageing society, there is currently deep concern amongst lifelong learning campaigners about the neglect of informal learning in favour of economic and skills driven concepts, often workplace related, which are more readily measured for success in contrast to personal or social development.

The effective absence of progress, despite multiple policy documents, inquiries and campaigns proposing a wider remit for lifelong learning, suggests a renewed need to problematise the whole idea of a policy approach to lifelong learning for a contemporary multi-cultural society. As has been progressively the case since 2010, following the change of government administration, community facilities are less likely to be publicly funded services, and can be readily dismantled. Yet in a UK society where the population is living longer and, generally, healthier lives, there are still older people (among them, many black and minority ethnic) experiencing discrimination and facing isolation (Jones, 2010); and the aims of lifelong learning expressed in terms of social justice, equality of opportunity, social inclusion and social progress (Griffin, 2000) need to be enacted. There is a clear case for lifelong learning strategies to offer ways to empower older people, who have faced barriers and are now at risk of facing severe social exclusion under recent austerity measures (Hartfree et al, 2013). Many of those facing exclusion have previously contributed to supporting the welfare state and may want to continue contributing in other ways in an ageing society. I concur with Ranson (2000) that exclusion needs to be located within particular communities, groups of people and societies, and that increasing

educational opportunities has long been a major factor in achieving greater social equality (Schuller, 2000). Inclusion through learning and community-based activity enables mutual social benefits, and whatever the problematic emphases in policy, the evidence on fairer societies emerging from more equal societies is plain (Dorling, 2011). As Griffin (2000) argues, ambiguity around definitions and therefore the focus for strategies neither prevents benefits nor the need for better policy and its enactment. He stresses:

Despite the fact that lifelong learning cannot be defined, and has no essential meaning, it is, nevertheless, a good thing and ought to be an object of policy (Griffin, 2000:20).

### **Summary and chapter conclusion**

I opened this chapter by exploring the concept of lifelong learning and referred to the works of key commentators in the field. In summary, it is clear that older black women learners have been largely absent from the major debates, despite the importance of learning both to them, and in the wider and older minority ethnic population, as discussed in Chapter 2. This chapter has also demonstrated the absent voices of older black women learners from empirical study in this field, implying that their (our) lives are not distinctive from other groups in the population. This has been problematic in a climate where lifelong learning is considered to have important benefits for all communities but where community is fragmented and comprises cultural differences and often, conflicting interests (Brent, 2009). Further, in ‘such a situation, the reconstruction of these lives is the intellectual property or purview of others’ (Gregg, 2005:3) but, as also argued in Chapter 2, this is no longer an acceptable position.

This chapter explored the various strands of lifelong learning – informal, non-formal and formal – and referred to the contributions to lifelong learning of people who are not trained, paid or acknowledged as teachers but who play an important role; and noted the limited research into lifelong learning among older black learners. The lack of a voice for black women is a major anomaly in a climate of policies, which have sought to address growing social exclusion (McNair, 2009) and improved citizenship and community

cohesion. The chapter stressed that lifelong learning is about the whole ‘range of influences’ that people encounter in their lives, and that linking educational opportunities to addressing social inequalities has to include challenging discrimination and dealing with oppressive institutions – the barriers to learning and social participation. Reiterating Crompton’s (1980) reference to lifelong learning as opting in and out of education through life, later chapters explore the extent to which this has been a flexible option for older black women.

As Field (2000) argues, lifelong learning encompasses an important conceptual framework but ambiguity in policy direction remains a key concern, maintaining ambiguities, not least in the absence of clear strategies linked to age, equalities and disadvantage. Such concerns also focused on the economic and age emphases in lifelong learning strategies, which strongly favour workforce skills, and younger, economically active people, identifying evident gaps between policy rhetoric and its implementation in practice. Together, these pose questions about benefits of lifelong learning strategies for an older black population.

Discussion of different models in interpreting lifelong learning opened questions about the purposes and activities fulfilled for my study participants. For example, Jarvis’ (2008) interpretation of lifelong learning as a social movement links to ideas examined in Chapter 2 on the work that black women carry out in helping others in their communities, raising questions about whether and how their learning and voluntary actions can be considered part of a social movement, whether they involve critical awareness and the extent to which socially progressive actions are involved.

The previous chapter considered black feminist epistemology and reasons why Africentric feminist theory can help in understanding how older black women as community activists and learners can enrich academic discourse in this area. In exploring the existing literature on lifelong learning, there was wide support from particular commentators to recognise its important social dimension. However, there was a conflicting picture, in social policy objectives, with goals of social inclusion, active community participation, equalities and community cohesion present but consistently

trumped by lifelong learning policies involving economic goals. In the UK, the continued refusal of successive governments to separate lifelong learning from the skills development agenda has been a major barrier to widening the scope of strategies, particularly with reference to older black women learners.

My conclusions from this chapter's discussion are that there is a fragmentation between educational aspirations and the strategies and resources focused on their delivery. This is occurring at a time when concerns about growing older populations have encouraged a wider vision for lifelong learning to be shared globally, suggesting the need for a renewed approach at the macro level of policy. At micro levels, there is a need to extend research to gain insights into the learning needs and experiences of diverse groups of older learners often invisible in these wider debates. Jackson's (2005) studies with older women have contributed significantly to the argument for the social dimensions of lifelong learning and the benefits of informal and community-based learning. As later chapters will demonstrate, informal learning among black women is an important step in meeting personal educational desires, as well as in sharing activities and responsibilities in local community settings. The NIACE (2007) inquiry, and Jackson's work into lifelong learning highlight the importance of social participation as integral to learning and the lack of detailed study among different groups of older learners but, in the context of an ageing black Caribbean population, there is still a great deal more to explore, not least, the benefits of such learning to the wider population.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **Approaches to researching older black women learners**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I start by presenting the philosophical approaches, which underpinned the methods I adopted in this narrative research study. Initially I consider my ontological and epistemological beliefs and then go on to discuss my reasons for choosing qualitative methodologies in the design, methods of data collection and conduct of my empirical study. I then move on to explore black feminist epistemology as underpinning my methodology and describe how this has helped shape key aspects of my research with older black women learners. The chapter then turns to discuss my reasons for choosing narrative research as my main approach and I discuss my research design, how I recruited participants, my ethical considerations and the particular dilemmas I faced in the research process. I go on to consider what it means to conduct narrative research in the context of my role as a black researcher, undertaking research with older black research participants of the same gender and racial heritage and in some cases, of a similar age group. The chapter next explores how I conducted the research and strove for methodological rigour throughout the process. The chapter draws on a wide range of work in the field particular: Collins (2000); Clandinin and Connelly (2000) Bell (2002); Riessman (2002); Hudson-Weems (2004); Reynolds (2005); Chase (2005); and Denzin and Lincoln (2008). The arguments presented in the two previous chapters assisted me in framing and strengthening my research questions as I moved forward with my empirical study into the benefits of lifelong learning for first generation African Caribbean women in an ageing society.

Using narrative inquiry as a major methodological tool my research was conducted employing group and one to one interviews with 102 older black women (see Appendix 5) to explore the women's understandings of learning and learning settings and the possible benefits. Whilst conducting my narrative research, I particularly drew inferences from the principles of Black Feminist thought, paying close attention to the common

principles of ‘community, culture, oral tradition’ and the ‘voice of black women’. These considerations together offered valuable reflections when I was designing ways to explore my research questions. In order to demonstrate the possible benefits of lifelong learning for first generation African Caribbean women, I sought to examine the ways in which the women gained access to learning; the nature of learning they encountered; and the type of ‘barriers’ they may have faced in accessing learning, both past and present. In framing my broad research question, I asked:

In what ways and to what extent are first generation African Caribbean women able to achieve benefits from lifelong learning for themselves as well as for the wider community?

My more specific research (sub) questions included:

- a) What is the nature of the women’s participation in lifelong learning?
- b) What experiences do these women have of accessing learning – past and present?
- c) What barriers do first generation African Caribbean women face in accessing learning?
- d) What are the benefits of lifelong learning for these women?
- e) What are the benefits of their learning for the wider community?

### **Philosophical assumptions - Ontological considerations**

My theoretical position in relation to this research stems from an interpretive paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008), and I am concerned to explore the benefits gained from lifelong learning from the participants’ perspectives, drawing on the stories they tell, but acknowledging my own role in the study, the experiences I bring and my analysis of these stories. My belief is that in order to shed light on new debates, I needed to position myself in the stories of the research participant in an attempt to access, understand and ascribe meanings to their various learning experiences: effectively recognising the socially constructed nature of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). I began my research with a particular ontological stance, which was that lifelong learning improves

lives but I was mindful of alternative views. What were the views located in the minds and experiences of these, first generation African Caribbean women? In attempting to resolve my own theories of lifelong learning and more specifically, the ontological manner in which I am able to offer that understanding, I have made some general philosophical assumptions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). These were important for me to recognise before I embarked on my empirical research.

The first assumption is an acknowledgement that governments are interested in learning in general and therefore learning is considered valuable. The second is that the concept of lifelong learning (even if not named in this way), is broadly (if ambiguously) understood by most people, and therefore the relevance of learning is appreciated. However, in order for individuals (and in this case, first generation African Caribbean women) to acknowledge the relevance of learning, understanding the labels, concepts and connections transmitted by government and wider society are important considerations. Whilst research can describe varied definitions or understandings of lifelong learning, I therefore have to question when, under what conditions and by whom, the concept of lifelong learning can be judged to be real. Certain qualitative methodological approaches suggest that a concept is real when it is constructed as such in the minds of the research participants. Thus reality is not 'out there', not in the data as such, but in the minds of actors (Guba and Lincoln, 1988); and adopting the role of a qualitative interpretivist researcher, my aim was to uncover that reality in a process of reconstruction which emerges when such concepts are shared with the researcher in the research process.

### **Qualitative research methodologies: researching older black women learners**

While selecting a qualitative research approach, the need to take into account the intended research participants meant that this was informed by an *Africentric feminist epistemology*, a perspective which emphasizes the intersection of multiple, polyrhythmic realities or the multiple polyrhythm's that flow through one's being (Sheared, 1999). A model has been developed that represents the intersecting polyrhythmic realities based upon the Africentric feminist deconstruction of an individual's worldview (Sheared, 1996). Four assumptions formulate the bases for acknowledging polyrhythmic realities



within the learning environment: concrete experience as the criterion for meaning; dialogue as the basis for assessing knowledge claims; an ethic of caring; and an ethic of personal accountability. These assumptions provide the framework for 'giving voice' to the perspectives of black learners (ibid, 1996:4) and were therefore significant considerations for designing my research with African Caribbean learners. As Gilham (2005) highlights, the research participants, and associated understandings of their place (or absence) in research, have particular importance in selecting appropriate research methodologies.

I have acknowledged my philosophical inclination towards a qualitative interpretive research paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008) but I also needed to recognise that my methodology derived from a starting point of theories, ideas, concepts and definitions related to the topic of lifelong learning. Similarly, associated critical activity that I engaged in based on my beliefs about the nature and character of the social world (Gillbert, 2008) influenced my standpoint in relation to the research. I adopted a social constructivist approach to my methodology, aiming to question and understand the detailed nature of lifelong learning, as created through the social interactions and the understandings of the research participants rather than establishing a definitive truth or truths about lifelong learning.

#### *Choosing a narrative approach within a social constructivist paradigm*

To address my broad research question on the reflexive experiences of older African Caribbean women in lifelong learning, I adopted a qualitative approach engaging with narrative inquiry. This enabled an exploration of complexities in views to uncover the women's own perceptions, reflecting their gendered as well as racialised positions. However, whilst viewing the world as socially constructed, 'gender is not fixed but fluid and cannot be separated from other forms of identity such as ethnicity, race, religion and class' (Jones and Barron: 2007:65). Similarly, individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences as they seek understanding of the worlds in which they live. As Creswell (2007) stresses, employing a social constructivist lens in research means relying heavily on the participants' views of a situation and searching for meanings under the

surface of these views. The nature of these meanings around lifelong learning is likely to be diverse for first generation African Caribbean women reflecting their varied biographies and experiences alongside the changing nature of adult and community learning.

While the key focus of my research is on those first generation African Caribbean women who came to Britain in the 1950s and early 1960s, I was mindful that black people have been present continuously in the UK for centuries, the first wave connected with slavery and the second with empire (Jaggi, 2000). Therefore the knowledge expressed by women participating in the study would not only reflect their own lived experiences but also the shared memories gained from interacting with others.

### **Research design: using qualitative methods for interpreting cultural narratives**

My choice of qualitative research methods for this study, as distinct from quantitative methods, is based on several factors. First, my choice of methods was conditioned by the way I understood the social world - that is, as socially constructed, where social phenomena are not readily susceptible to measurement. Quantitative methods of data collection therefore, were not appropriate for the research questions, which I had identified, which sought to explore stories and the meanings behind them (Bryman and Teevan, 2005). Next, my social and political beliefs in the value of the interactive nature of face-to-face contact with individuals led me to focus on dialogue, and to consider ways that influence and meanings emerge at a collaborative level. In addition to this, I was profoundly interested in the views of the women participants, their opinions and perspectives on the power of learning, and understanding their lifelong learning experiences was important to me. Research methods which involved person to person contact therefore provided me with opportunities to delve deeper into the lived experiences of the women participants and I found valuable inspiration in the writings of black feminist, Anna Julia Cooper (May, 2007:37), who stressed that pure reason tends to miss the facts that can be gleaned by paying attention to lived experience and the particular nuances of different life circumstances. Such nuances, I concluded, would be

better found using face-to-face methods that could assist me in eliciting narratives of lived experience from first generation African Caribbean women.

My research, in the chapters, which follow, includes illustrations from transcripts (re-produced in dramatised accounts) following face-to-face encounters in groups and in one-to-one interviews. In selecting and analysing material to include, I adopted an interpretive stance, which allowed the rich detail to be drawn out. In any situation, meanings are likely to be understood subjectively as an outcome of communication between the researcher and researched or of interactions with others but they are also negotiated socially and historically (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, Bruner, 2004). I would argue that the role of the researcher in effectively interpreting the issues facing marginalized groups is also a significant consideration since it is not always possible for participants to view the depth and breadth of their own situation and draw conclusions. For example, issues of double discrimination facing first generation African Caribbean women perceived by others may not be regularly expressed or acknowledged. Commentators, such as Carby (1997:49) acknowledge that post-war British 'wives and mothers were granted entry into paid work only so long as this did not harm the family'. Yet women from Britain's reserve army of labour in the colonies were recruited into the labour force far beyond any such considerations. The researcher is therefore able to examine 'difference' conceptually in the light of other research framing the study, examining such additional factors, which may provide alternative insights into particular forms of oppression in play, where these may not always be acknowledged openly by the participants. Research therefore has the potential to uncover a range of factors by appreciating the value of the contribution from the participants as a result of their unique and diverse experiences, while locating these rich stories alongside academic and historical debates.

Ellis (1985) highlights the responsibility of research not only to give voice to those that may be oppressed or absent from research but also to share the wider critical understanding, noting:

There is a realisation that if education is to have any real value for women it must not only raise their consciousness about the oppressive structures that keep them

in positions of powerlessness, but also help them to understand the nature of the social, economic and political systems in which they operate and which operate against them (Ellis: 1985:100).

My research sought to explore the value and benefits of lifelong learning for groups of older learners who are motivated to learn and work with others in the community but who are often low in the socio-economic spectrum. However, while I have argued for ways that the process of research can extend insights, as Ellis identifies above, it is important to consider social responsibilities and moral principles that acknowledge subjects' empowerment and challenge paradigms which sustain existing inequalities. While this kind of approach grounded in the social and cultural complexity of the research settings generates more complex demands on researchers, Root (1993) also argues that it also creates better conditions for reflexive research and developing critical theory.

*Research design: adopting a narrative approach with first generation African Caribbean women*

As will be observed in later sections of this chapter, there are wide variations within narrative research. Narrative study (or narrative inquiry) is an interdisciplinary study of the activities involved in generating and analysing stories of life experiences and seeks to understand how people make meaning in their lives. The research becomes a collaborate document – a mutually constructed story from both researcher and participants (Connelly and Clandinin, 1999). Contemporary narrative study is concerned with storytelling and is not just about focusing on the content that participants communicate but is also about the social interactions between interviewer and interviewees (audience and narrator). As a result of the narrative turn, research broadly adopting this approach has been used in a range of different disciplines. However, in this study, I engage with the sociological dimensions (storytelling), drawing on the work of Denzin, 1989c, Holsten and Gubrium (1998), Bell, (2002), Riessman (2002), Connelly and Clandinin (2006) and Chase (2008), in particular. In considering my choice of contemporary narrative study, I recognise that it comprises 'an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods – all revolving around an

interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them' (Chase, 2008:58).

In attempting to narrow definitions to design my study, I found Connelly and Clandinin's (2006: 375) characterization of narrative inquiry helpful where they assert that:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and...interpret their past in terms of these stories...Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as told, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience.

Narrative study allowed me to locate my own experience and background at every stage of the research process and I compared, reviewed and learnt from approaches to my previous research with older women learners - members of the Women's Institute (Etienne and Jackson, 2011). Through these comparisons of methods, I was able to strengthen my strategies for working with older black women learners. My preference for conducting narrative study rather than adopting a more ethnographic approach to narrative inquiry allowed me to involve a wider range of participants across diverse locations in the fieldwork. Rather than immerse myself fully in ethnographic fieldwork, this approach enabled a greater focus on narrative construction from a variety of perspectives (Franzosi 1998, Bell, 2002, Riessman, 2002, Chase, 2005). It provided opportunities for me to explore phenomenon that emerged from learning through narratives and allowed me to explore the detail of the social worlds (Gillham 2005:8) projected in the minds of the participants.

According to Bell (2002) narrative study rests on the epistemological assumption that we make sense of random experience by rendering it within a story structure. We select 'those elements of experience to which we will attend, and we pattern those chosen elements in ways that reflect stories available to us' (Bell, 2002:207). Exchanging stories is often understood within a larger story of friendships and communities; and with first generation African Caribbean women I was jointly constructing meanings around their experiences by interpreting their lives, especially where their stories allowed deeper hidden assumptions to be revealed. Labov and Waletzky's (1997) discussion 'Ordinary people's oral narratives of everyday experience', which they contrast with life histories

and folklore, helped me to consider distinctions in how I wanted to encourage the story-telling processes for gathering data. I began to understand the oral narratives as a specific form of discourse characterised by certain structures serving specific social functions. Chase (2005) points out that the central tenet of narrative study, is that speakers construct events through narrative, rather than simply referring to events (Chase 2005). Similarly, narratives often deviate from chronological structures and Chase (2005:67) also asserts that the 'content of a life story embodies a person's identity and this both develops and changes over time'. These discussions around time helped me to consider a design which would enable exploring lifelong learning experiences across temporal spaces, reverting back to past and forward to present events flexibly, and also to recognise that the juxtaposition of different experiences and the variations in temporal sequence of reported events offer insights into their significance for the story-tellers.

Labov and Waletzky (1997) identified further sociolinguistic features of oral narratives, including the importance of orientation in time, place and situation, which prompted me to think about when, where and at what venues interviews would be conducted. This work also encouraged me to consider what the authors refer to as evaluation – identifying the central point of the women's story; resolution – its outcome; and coda – linking the story back to the present moment. These were valuable ways of thinking about narratives which I was able to apply both to gathering and subsequently interpreting data. However, there were other considerations in moving the study from theory to practice, and Schegloff (1997) critiqued Labov and Waletzky for failing to take account of the interactional context in which oral narratives are elicited and received. I have already acknowledged the significance of interactions between researcher and participants and among research participants; and these reflections encouraged me to use group interviews or discussions as one part of my research which enabled some women to tell their stories in conversation with, and sometimes prompted by, others. A particular critique of narrative inquiry, is that it works on people's consciously told stories (Bell, 2002) but what of the deeper stories that people are often unaware of? Participants construct stories that support their own interpretations of themselves or events. Nonetheless, these stories provide a window into peoples' perceptions and beliefs (Bell, 2002).

## **Pilot study**

As a part of the design for this study I chose to undertake a pilot study, involving five interviews and a discussion group with older black women in one area of London. The pilot study helped me to hone my research questions and methods in various ways. I comment on a few of these below and some also in later sections. Undertaking a pilot study also caused me to reflect back more fully on themes I had drawn from some of the literature I had already researched. The narratives of older black women learning and volunteering in my pilot study pointed to high levels of active citizenship and engagement in reaching out to those at risk of social exclusion, and I became interested in this apparently vital role they appeared to be contributing in maintaining healthy, strong local communities. This prompted me to extend questions I had initially conceived around the benefits of lifelong learning for the women to a wider frame.

As a black researcher, interviews in my pilot study also instilled in me a greater sense of responsibility which I had not anticipated and was not prepared for, as I realised the extent of my lack of knowledge and awareness of the learning experiences of first generation African Caribbean women. I learnt a great deal about the nature of tolerance and survival and how lifelong learning is manifested in the lives of the women participants. I have to acknowledge, as is evident from the transition from the pilot to the main study that the research design and its conduct were shaped by the participants and my learning from them, alongside my growing awareness of debates around the diverse fields of academic research involved. The stories told by women in my pilot study demonstrated their ability to assess their own learning needs and the needs of others around them. I observed that in doing this they appeared to challenge and critique each other through debates and campaigns and were part of change making. This meant that I began to consider how engagement as community volunteers linked with an apparently strong desire to acquire education at the highest level, and Chapters 5, 6 and 7 which present narratives from the main study thus go on to explore some of these links and the reasons for such desires.

I wrongly presumed that all the women in my pilot study must surely be motivated to learn, after all, why otherwise would they be learning at this age? I realised that the attraction for learning was not always about learning per se but about ‘participation’ and for others ‘a way of finding motivation’ and belonging. At an early stage in conducting my pilot study, I found myself considering the usefulness of other methods of data collection, such as Conversational Analysis (Have, 2009), and wondered how useful it would have been for me to re-capture a reaction to something said in the research process, such as facial expressions, eye contact and even the nature of silences. In the pilot study, this was less a problem, as every expression from the limited number of women remained clear and vivid throughout the process. I had regularly observed such expressions before in Caribbean households with mother’s aunts, and grandmothers and the expressions, gestures and body language, which came before or after particular oral expressions, which were often well rehearsed. However, I realised once I came to the main study I would need to observe and record such details more carefully once the numbers of women in the study increased. While not adopting Conversational Analysis (Have, 2009), it offered valuable tools for observing these non-verbal nuances, and I recognised that these would be significant for conveying meanings in presenting the narratives.

I wondered to what extent my reading of particular literature by black women might influence the nature and style of my research design. Were my expectations coming from a particular radical feminist stance and therefore at risk of prejudging the women participants? The quote below which ends this section is drawn from my earlier readings and brings this section to an end by highlighting the frustration of first generation African Caribbean women in the UK who had high expectations of participating in education and illustrate the ways in which they sought social justice through wider participation in their local communities. It also draws attention to the social responsibilities that I believed I needed to be mindful of in relation to these participants.

Many of the women teachers who did not go back into the schools were to become involved in the Black education struggles of the seventies, inspired by the



Black Power movement with its call for social justice and militant resistance by Black communities when under attack (Bryan et al: 1985:70).

### **Designing the main research: recruiting participants and data collection**

Epistemology shapes the principles and rules by which we decide whether and how a phenomenon, such as lifelong learning, can be known and how related knowledge and insights can be demonstrated (Gilbert, 2008). However, as researchers we need to ask about the boundaries of reality (ies). How do we know what we know and what are the rules for going about it (Berger and Luckmann, 1966)? These were questions and prior assumptions, I considered and which underpinned the decisions I took when deciding the design of my main research.

My aim was to explore the nature and outcomes of learning acquired by older black women in community settings. I was particularly interested in the benefits of such learning to the women on an individual level and also for the wider community. In addition, I was interested in uncovering the importance the women placed on learning and any barriers they may have faced in accessing learning. This led to the design of a series of topics and questions, which I used as prompts to elicit stories in my interviews (see Appendix 2). In my criteria for recruiting participants, from the outset, the voluntary nature of participation was conveyed in information about the study. I prepared a plan for participants, stating the preferred maximum number of women in each group interview and explained my approach to each interview. I looked forward to working with my research participants and considered what they might anticipate and the nature of guidance I should be providing for them. My preparations included close attention to confidentiality and privacy where interviews were held at local community centres, in particular.

I began a process of purposeful sampling in selecting participants in September 2008, having received the Michael Stephens lifelong learning research award, which provided

me with access to a bursary for travel and overnight accommodation<sup>9</sup>. I emailed organisations and individuals in key urban centres in the UK with large African Caribbean populations, expressing interest in identifying women as volunteers for my study. I provided an outline of information (Appendix 1) outlining my study, and followed up with letters, emails and telephone calls, setting dates for interviews in advance. I allowed myself two hours for each interview and visited centres to familiarise myself with venues. I interviewed women in Community centres, Community Colleges, Town Halls, Caribbean Cultural centres, and in Tenants rooms (see Appendix 5). I also met with women in local Caribbean shops and in their homes. I adopted a similar approach pragmatically to the schedule I had prepared two years previously for a national study of lifelong learning (Etienne, 2009) and asked participants to complete brief monitoring forms indicating their age and place of birth.

I was aware of the need to maintain contact, to avoid non-attendance, especially when locations were as far away from my home as Glasgow. I allowed on average 3 weeks between contact and meeting up with participants. During that time I held brief telephone conversations with individuals to reassure them of the nature of the research and their involvement. Once I obtained permission for interviews to take place, the women chose the location of interviews. I wanted to explore with the women, the phenomena of lifelong learning and its benefits, and my analytical objective was to elicit individual and group experiences using largely open-ended questions. The women were able to respond to my questions in their own words and the responses to my initial questions influenced the type of questions or prompts I used subsequently. In a number of group interview locations where particular women were quiet and appeared uncomfortable in speaking, specific topics and themes introduced by myself and other women in the group stimulated interest, engagement and spontaneous laughter (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

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<sup>9</sup> With thanks to the Standing Conference for university teaching and research in Education (SCUTREA) whose award for my extensive travel made this research possible

The criteria underlying my purposeful sampling involved seeking older black women who had come to the UK from the Caribbean between the 1950s and early 1960s. I did not choose quota sampling because I did not want to sample equal numbers of men for comparison and I was not concerned to include a particular balance of numbers of women born in different Caribbean islands. Neither did I use snowballing techniques (Streeton et al, 2004), as I wanted to gather as diverse a range of women as possible, impartially. Whilst a number of suggestions were made to me about women I should interview, I largely relied on my own strategies so that I could avoid including women who might provide similar views because of their networked links with other participants. I therefore relied on my own resources, such as the database I had compiled based on local authority demographic and socio-economic data; the information I acquired from websites, such as on community centres; and the direct phone calls to individuals and organisations.

I selected locations, primarily in areas where first generation African Caribbean women initially settled in large numbers, on arrival in the UK. I was keen to find out where learning was taking place for women of that generation and contacted the local authority to access their knowledge of local education, voluntary, community health and social care services - particularly for elders in the local community. In order to obtain a better cross-section, I obtained a list of possible organisations via the local authority education, social services and voluntary sector departments in each selected city. Whilst I did not strictly rely on the information provided by the local authority (much of the material was out of date and obsolete), they served a useful purpose in helping me to compile a comprehensive list, using updated information from the internet which I then revised from my face to face contact with individuals and organisations. I conducted searches of black and minority ethnic organisations and businesses in each selected city, independent of my local authority searches. I also made contact with local authority staff and individuals in local small business enterprises; community and leisure organisations; black and minority ethnic projects in the voluntary and community sector; faith, health, cultural and other organisations to find older black women participating in learning.

## **Conducting the fieldwork**

My eventual respondents came from a combination of local black businesses, leisure, faith, health organisations and the community and voluntary sector organisations in 11 UK cities (see Appendix 3) identified for the study. Via letter, email and telephone contact, I arranged meetings with those who would assist me in setting up one to one and group interviews. Prior to conducting interviews, I visited the venues (apart from the homes of participants) and spoke with managers, community workers or other staff, and gained agreements to use meeting rooms for interviews. All the women who took part in the main study volunteered to participate and some asked if they could be interviewed in their homes. Making face to face contact with the women provided a further opportunity to discuss the purpose of the study. I discussed the nature of research and how confidentiality would be respected at all stages of the study. At the start of the interview I sought permission from the women to tape-record the interviews to assist me in transcribing their narratives, and in most cases, I received no objections from those agreeing to participate. Where I interviewed women in community organisations, I ensured that I did not encroach on the day-to-day workings of the organisations and the responsibilities of the staff concerned (Barbour, 2005), and have used pseudonyms in all cases in order to protect the identity of the participants. I kept all interview and field notes, tapes and tape recorder appropriately secured in order to protect the anonymity of participants and organisations.

My fieldwork interviews at the centre locations were conducted over a 15 months period and during that time I interviewed 102 women in groups' and one to one interviews. Appendix 5 shows the spread of participants across different cities and provides details of individual participants and their profiles. As stated earlier, interviews were held in community centres, which included African Caribbean heritage centres, social clubs; community halls and colleges; church halls as well as in shopping centres. The ages of the women participating in the study ranged from 52 to 101, and in selecting the sample for my empirical study, I sought first generation African Caribbean women involved in the activities of voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations and those who frequented other social settings such as leisure centres and theatre projects. The majority

of women chose to be interviewed in organisations where they conducted learning and/or where they carried out their volunteering roles.

I had given careful regard to how I defined the target population from whom my participants were drawn which consisted of older black women learners, aged 50 and over, born in the Caribbean, many now volunteering in the community. In arranging access to participants, I did not want to rely to any large extent on community leaders or centre managers to pass on information to possible participants. I wanted to ensure as much direct contact as possible with the women so as to avoid any possible bias or misrepresentation about the study. I produced a timetable and considered constraints such as time and travel, where my population lived, how long I would allow myself to meet with participants, whether it was possible to conduct second visits. I aimed to conduct at least one group and one one-to-one interview in each of the 11 cities identified. On arrival at community centres, on occasions, there were often additional women who fitted the criteria for inclusion and expressed an interest in participating. However because of time constraints, I was not always able to accept additional offers of interest.

Other limitations in scope centred around the fact that whilst the study acknowledged the struggles of the black male in UK society, it chose to hear only the narratives of older black women, recognising these as an important vehicle to bring about reflection and change in this inter-disciplinary field. As Chapter 1 describes, this group of women represent a significant group of learners thought to be fully assimilated into UK society, yet may hold very different perceptions of their own interactions with learning.

### **Data Collection: use of interview in narrative lines of inquiry**

In choosing to make use of narrative interviews (Chase, 2005, Clandinin, 2007), I was interested in accessing understanding and attitudes towards lifelong learning, and acknowledged the role of face-to-face methods in uncovering why people think as they do. I also wanted to encourage active debate (social interaction through group interviews) but was mindful that these could result in dramatic changes of heart (Barbour: 2008) during the research process. However, my belief is that such heightened social interactions are useful in exploring the richness of experiences and views of first

generation African Caribbean women and in accessing opinions beyond those that a participant may consider a researcher wishes to hear (Chase, 2005). They may also enable the researcher to observe a variety of communications and responses, whereas one-to-one interviews occasionally lead to participants to provide responses that they believe the researcher wants or expects (Burgess, 1989).

In group interviews, I used questions based on topic lists (Gray, 2009) in order to gain insights which I compared with information gained from individual interviews.

Individual and group interviews with the women lasted, on average between 1 and 2 hours, and I decided to use prompts because I was not undertaking a life history but was interested in examining particular aspects of their lives – namely their experiences of lifelong learning and its perceived benefits. At the same time, I observed the nature of narrative learning occurring (Biesta et al, 2011) whilst the women told their stories and my prompts were often introduced in a different order to follow the narratives. The varied settings where interviews were conducted were familiar to participants and this meant that in most cases, they were comfortable in their surroundings and able to engage fully in discussion and in presenting their opinions. In groups, I was able to observe the ways in which the women referred to lifelong; and how they described their learning activities and experiences.

### **Conduct of my research: data collection and participants' rights**

Whilst a number of issues of ethical concern have been raised in the previous sections it is important to note that in conducting my research I gave full and careful consideration to ethical issues. In taking responsibility for my own ethical practice, I adhered to the British Sociological Association's (BSA, 2004) Statement of Ethical Practice, in particular in relation to professional integrity. In addition, I was guided by the British Educational Research Association's (BERA, 2004) revised ethical guidelines for educational research and recognized my responsibility to the participants, my university and the wider research community. I assured anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent at each stage of my interaction with the women in my study and considered what I was expecting of participants and what they might have been expecting of me. I

considered how I would deal with the accuracy and validity of my data as well as how I would maintain confidentiality in relation to the storage of data.

Throughout the research process I respected the participants' confidentiality and protected the identity of the women and the organisations involved in the research by using pseudonyms. Unlike reminiscence therapy, I did not find the need to prompt the women in my study with photographs or other mementos, although at times they chose to show me books, video tapes or photographs which they felt would add to my understanding of their experiences. They recalled learning experiences through polyrhythmic realities (described above and in Chapter 2); through social interactions which both revealed and re-created learning. In situations where participants were sharing information of a personal or sensitive nature, I was mindful of their rights under data protection legislation (the 1998 Data Protection Act, in particular) and ensured that their personal details and information shared with me was not divulged to others. I retained information relating to my research secure, whether located in a password protected site on my computer, in the form of handwritten notes of interviews or in the form of tape recordings. While these codes of conduct denote standard good practice in research, in the process of doing research, other, more ambiguous issues can arise which are often hard to predict and therefore have to be resolved in practice. These are discussed below.

### **Dilemmas in the research process**

I have referred to some of these dilemmas above in terms of my awareness of social and moral responsibilities and my aims for integrity in all phases of the research process, and my questions revolved around my relationships with research participants. Did the women have confidence in me? Did they trust me? What values was I bringing to the research? Was I making implicit judgements about participants? As Milbourne (2013: 66) highlights, formal codes may guide conduct but 'a willingness to recognise moral obligation underpinned by the demands of social linkage' may be more helpful for building trust in research relationships in community-based settings and thereby enhance information sharing.

One example illustrates the kind of issues and dilemmas that arose. As I was beginning a one to one interview at a Caribbean Cultural community centre, one participant asked if I would interview an older black Caribbean male because she advised me that he had resented the idea that the research was targeted at women only and felt this was ‘hugely discriminatory’. She relayed to me his feelings of wanting to be involved and that he felt that he ‘had a right’ to be involved. It appeared that the woman had been given an ultimatum by the male and as a result, she was pleading with me to accommodate his wishes. Although I felt that this placed me in a rather awkward position, I was mindful of safeguarding my research relationship with my female research participant, knowing that she needed an answer from me before proceeding with her interview. She was clearly fearful of how she might be treated by her male colleague if he was not allowed into the process. She felt that my offer of speaking with him separately concerning the nature of the research would be insufficient, as he wanted to participate in a full interview with me. I realised that my actions would matter greatly and I wondered about the appropriateness of going ahead with the man’s interview just to keep the peace. I finally agreed to interview him after my interview with her. The interview with him was short and inappropriate for the nature of my study but instilled in me the need for further research of a different type as well as making me aware that however much I prepare, there are always unexpected turns in the research process.

Such issues of power and ethical concerns continued to pose dilemmas in the research process but I improved my ability to handle such situations as the study progressed. I reflected on this event in my research notebook and considered how I would handle a future situation if it were to occur again. The interviews held with women in their homes were relaxed and more reflective. At community centres they were tenser and this was often the result of men wanting to participate. Other ethical dilemmas for me concerned the extent to which the women participants were fully aware of the reasons for the research and its potential benefits. Feedback from earlier research into research and BME people (Butt and O’Neil, 2004) reported participants complaining about being ‘researched to death?’ To what extent was I replicating this experience? In order to encourage willingness, trust and confidence in the research process, I considered sharing



with the women that I regarded them as already playing a positive role in their communities and that research could have significant benefits in an ageing society.

As a result of Butt and Oniel's (2004) findings and to maximise participation, I considered sharing with the women information from studies that showed learning in later years as having important positive outcomes and the potential to help others in positive ways. However, I questioned the extent to which such information would influence the women's responses to my research and chose not to share such information during the research. In considering ways that the women in my study would benefit or gain from the research, I gave due regard to their needs and wellbeing and was particularly concerned with ensuring respect in the research process. I felt it was important that after the completion of my fieldwork, the women could have continued involvement of some kind. This could be via my role as the researcher, making available to them, material on lifelong learning of possible interest to them. Where appropriate I also encouraged women not participating in interviews to pen relate articles for their oral history projects. In those ways I offered some reciprocity but was careful to ensure that such encouragement by me, did not affect the research process and outcomes.

#### *Overcoming constraints when capturing voice during the group interview*

Choosing interviews as my main method of data collection allowed me opportunities to explore the women's broad opinions about lifelong learning, its benefits and their cultural expectations. While one-to-one interviews are likely to bring important additional dimensions to the research process, they also present their own challenges both in the immediate processes of communication between the researcher and participant and in later interpretations (Gray, 2009). I was motivated to elicit views and opinions through face to face strategies but in choosing to use group interviews as well, I recognised the valuable role that groups could play in revealing detail and meanings 'under the surface' (Schostak, 2006:123) of my overt research questions. Brah, (2000) identifies the relationship between personal biography and collective history as complex and contradictory; and while acknowledging that personal identities always articulate with the collective experience, she points to the specificity of a person's life experience 'etched in

the daily minutiae of lived social relations [which] produces trajectories that do not simply mirror group experience' (Brah, 2000:473). Thus I was concerned to observe both individual responses and those emerging from the different interactions as group discussions ensued.

Schostak (2006) points out that each encounter in the interview process involves negotiations, calculations and interpretations. Any move one person makes towards or away from another, in language or in non-verbal signals, involves a degree of risk, a risk of misunderstanding, of misjudgement or misadventure but it also involves an opportunity to enrich experience. In an individual interview, the participant can take centre stage and provide her views and experiences without intervention or influence from others, especially if the researcher/interviewer selects a less structured approach. In both scenarios, unlike in my pilot study (discussed above), I was able to allow participants to tell their stories freely, guided by carefully introduced questions or prompts, to set the research 'boundaries' and steer the passage of the narratives.

My choice of group interviews proved extremely challenging as the women often spoke over each other in interviews, making recordings harder to decipher and transcribe. I made copious notes of the interviews as far as I could and reflected back on these notes immediately after interviews, also noting my own reflections. In order to identify the main speaker I would ensure the tape recorder was closest to the speaker; I used the beginnings of the women's words and my short statements such as: 'listen up' Iona – 'red hat' - to recall who was speaking, and during interviews often called the women by their name such as 'Is that your view Mary?' Or 'How did you cope with that Ivy?' I made a concerted effort to make notes of the often, short assertions I heard away from the main speaker, such as, 'That's right' (Mabel) or 'See it there' (Pam).

Navigating my way through polyrhythmic realities where the women in my study invariably spoke all at the same time, posed obstacles for me. I overcame these by relying on the combination of tape recordings and field notes to capture the nuances of the stories. I relied on my notes during and immediately after interviews and in the process, relied on prompts to assist me in remembering key occurrences and non-verbal responses:

For example when I became aware that one woman was observing me, I noted what I saw from the corners of my eyes such as: ‘X staring at me disapprovingly’.

### **Conducting the narrative analysis: Power, reflexivity, bias**

Linking back to earlier discussion around narrative interpretation and power in the research process to awareness of my own social and moral responsibilities, I was keen to ensure a genuine reflection of the voices of the women and to avoid, as Sultana points out:

Criticism of research for perpetuating neo-colonial representations, having Western biases, and purporting to speak ‘for’ women [which has] generated resistance. (Sultana, 2007:375)

Thus credibility and integrity in rendering the data, achieved through reflexivity, were important concerns in addressing my awareness of the power embedded in the role of the researcher. Nightingale and Cromby (1999) identify two types of reflexivity – personal and epistemological. On a personal level, I was interested in promoting the highest level of integrity possible in my research, and epistemologically, aimed to improve rigour through use of triangulation (O’Donoghue and Punch, 2003). I recognised that to maximise the integrity of the research in both respects, I needed to make continual use of comparison and contrast, and be unremitting in seeking underlying meanings and in my use of reflexive questions. This also involved first reading the narrative literature related to black women – in particular Black feminist epistemology; listening to the women’s stories gained from interviews in a wide range of locations; comparing notes from observing activity at the different venues; and referring regularly to reflective field notes. Despite adopting these comparative tools and continually reflecting between the data and conceptual interpretations, I found it difficult to remove myself, as insider, from the research process (Greenbank, 2003). My field notes contained numerous observations on the way that I had carried out the research and the ‘goings-on’ in the settings where the women told their stories – in particular, the involvement of male partners or fellow organisation members in attempting to play a part in the research process, and ultimately

these became a part of the reflexive process and were significant in writing up some of the narratives.

*Rigour, validity and representation*

The question of rigour and validity in research and the extent to which a series of individuals and group narratives represents those of a larger population is a common debate in qualitative inquiry (Hammersley, 1998). The women I interviewed arrived in the UK during a similar period; they were of the same ethnic group and gender; of similar ages and lived in comparable similar areas of the UK. They had faced similar challenges in their lives. However, rather than widely generalisable data, my concern was to generate insights into an under-researched area which would contribute valuable analysis and depth of understanding. My interest was also to pursue rigorous but also socially just investigation in a context where stories about marginalisation shape research material and require of the researcher a wider social obligation to listen (Behar, 1996).

I was also mindful that my potentially powerful role as a researcher gave me influence over the way that I re-presented knowledge which could be problematic (Holt, 2003) but in the context of this research, demanded awareness of social and moral responsibilities (Fine et al, 2005). If this knowledge contains verifiable facts, such problems are minimised but in narratives, there is potentially a crisis of representation. Legitimising the outcomes of research when there is no static, measurable, external reality has to give way to processes of integrity and rigour, through which validity in the research can be judged (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Like Stronach and MacLure (1997) who discuss different possible interpretations of some of their data, I too experienced dilemmas in presenting the women's narratives. It required me to constantly question my own assumptions and ways in which my beliefs and my life experiences were influencing my interpretation and rendering of the women's stories.

Gilbert (2008:423) states that the 'use of a narrative analysis approach with its focus on the social construction of the story means that uncovering the 'truth' no longer becomes the object of analysis'. This moves the focus from 'what?' to 'how and why': seeking understandings and meanings rather than facts. I compared each story with other stories

depicting similar experiences and asked *why* is each interviewee telling the story in this way? What is the purpose of the story? Why does it occur at this point in the conversation? In conducting my analysis as a researcher, I acknowledged here that I was seeking to interpret what I had found, shaped by my own experiences and understanding and the questions I had constructed through my research themes and analysis of literature, and drawing on tools of narrative study. Denzin and Lincoln's (2008: 31) observation was both valuable and pertinent:

All research is interpretive; it is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied. Some beliefs may be taken for granted, invisible only assumed, whereas others are highly problematic and controversial.

Therefore, interrogating and reflecting on my assumptions and observations became significant parts of the process.

#### *Questions I asked myself about the research role*

I conducted frequent checks on what I had read, what I observed and the stories told by the women, in order to begin to clarify meanings. My first question was – where was social justice in my role as a researcher? When a problem occurred, I considered the power dynamics that had occurred with the involvement of men in the interviews, how the women related to this, how I reacted, how I handled the situation. Whilst I recognised the power I had as a researcher, I also wanted the women to respect me and have confidence in me. Was all this possible? I acknowledged that social justice is at the centre of my role as a researcher and I was committed to achieving integrity (Gray, 2009), and so therefore I endeavoured to ensure that the women's interests were integral priorities for me.

Linking back to earlier discussions on whether to share material, views, values and studies on lifelong learning, I also considered how I could introduce discussion on 'race' and racism, I considered carefully how I might avoid inappropriate bias in my research by adopting a particular approach in such areas. My black feminist leanings assisted me

in adopting, in all areas, a sisterly approach where I placed myself in the women's positions and considered what their expectations might be as I prepared for engagement with them. As discussed above, I considered my research approach to be of a participatory and collaborative nature and this entailed not only ethical responsibilities as a researcher but extending these to consider carefully the roles involved in the participatory nature of the research. I needed to ensure that the women were happy with the approaches I had adopted in any given situation.

I also believed that it was possible for my research to have transformative potential (Cresswell, 2005) in that it could lead to improving existing lifelong learning theory, policy and practice. Through encouraging women to relate and recognise their stories as research narratives both individually and collectively, my study gives expression to groups of people not otherwise heard and may therefore have emancipatory potential. However, as Fine et al. (2005) emphasise, it is also important to question the claims and powers of critical research. I had a number of prior assumptions (that is, older black women have the potential to improve their lives through lifelong learning) but I was careful not to allow these to cloud my judgement and obscure the voices of the women (Finlay, 2002). In presenting the women's stories, I therefore chose to portray an unrefined or raw form of the narratives (in the form of performance Acts) initially, prior to my interpretations and development of ideas which emerged from the data. In the chapters which follow (5-7), I am both the narrator but also a collaborator, seeking to provide transparency which allows the black women's voices to be heard.

I have aimed to avoid inappropriate generalisations in my later interpretations of the narratives and whilst I read material from the experiences of black women in America, in the Caribbean, in Africa and in the UK, I was careful to view the experiences of the women in my study with fresh lenses. I was, however, also aware that the wider debates around gender, race, age and learning situate the study and are significant to ways that it contributes to critical social research.

As a black researcher working with black participants, I was keen to understand how other black women (Phoenix, 2001; Reynolds, 2005; Maylor, 2009b; Rollock, 2013;

Egharevba, 2013) had conducted research with black participants and the dilemmas they faced in the process. I was also keen to understand my 'insider/ outsider' role in the research process (Reynolds, 2005). As a sister and fellow African Caribbean woman, I could not presume that the women would enter into a researcher / research participant relationship comfortably and easily. I still had to gain a certain level of trust (Reynolds: 2005:7). I was often greeted with what appeared to the outsider as contempt and hostility but which I acknowledged as accepted ways that an older black Caribbean woman might engage with a daughter. One woman's greeting offers an example from my study: 'If you coming to talk 'bout slavery – don't bother cum here wid dat'. This comment was couched in distrust and also designed to 'put me in my place' from the outset but not without care extended. hooks (1993) explains this approach in 'Sisters of the Yam' :

Since many black women were, and still are, raised in households where most of the love and affection we receive comes from black women elders – mothers, aunts and grandmothers – who may also use criticism in a verbally abusive way, we may come to see such a practice as a caring gesture (hooks, 1993:33).

At other times, I felt particular hostilities from the women during the early stages of contact and more firmly excluded as an outsider. I was able to draw on Sudbury's thoughts on the importance of challenging the hostilities which can face 'educated' women in community based organisations, especially suspicion towards university educated black women. Sudbury's study of black women's organisations in the UK aptly illustrates what I felt that I faced on occasions:

There's the whole thing about education, the acceptance of educated women (supposed) and the fact that they've never been considered black enough. You've gone to university, you're doing a doctorate, either you think you're better than us or you're far better than us, you can't possibly relate to us (Sudbury: 1998:172).

I was therefore mindful of both challenging prior assumptions but also needing to ensure that the women remained committed to participating in the research and it seemed valuable to them that I would be personally analysing and writing up the research and

that their voices would be heard; and these were aspects I reminded participants about. However, I too needed to recognise that, as Rollock (2013: 494) points out:

Within the research context, a shared racial identity does not inevitably guarantee ease of access or rebalance unequal differences in the distribution of power between researcher and participant.

In conducting research with first generation African Caribbean women therefore, I could not easily divorce my own lived experiences from the process of conducting research and thus acknowledging the interpretative nature of the study was important. From the outset, in the design of my questions, my interactions with the women and in the meanings I placed on what I heard in the group interviews, my reflexivity was continually apparent, both through critically assessing assumptions and comparative reflections. For example, the Anancy<sup>10</sup> stories referred to by the women that I spoke to were the very stories told to me as a child: heroes searching for success but facing major challenges were meaningful and understood, and helped shape my own appreciation of the value of education. I further acknowledged this attachment to the context of the women's stories as I listened to the tape recordings and examined my transcripts.

This led me to reflect carefully on how I would represent the women's narratives and by explicitly grounding analysis in the multiple voices (Collins, 2009), I attempted to highlight the diversity, richness and power of Black women's ideas. In presenting the women's voices and providing parallel narrative comments and reflections whilst re-telling the stories, I was able to participate collaboratively in the telling of the stories. This collaborative approach I refer to as '*our voice*' in the research process – not solely the words as spoken by the research participants, individually and together but combined with the narrator. This offered a distinctive and useful tool for rendering narrative data. In presenting the data, '*our voice*' separated the narrative introductions, interruptions and '*asides*' which situated the stories from the participants' narratives.

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10 Caribbean folklore stories: *Anancy* is skilled in wisdom and speech and a figure of admiration. The *Anancy* storyteller is often the black Caribbean village matriarch



Like Rollock, I needed,

‘to do more than simply report the findings...’ (Rollock, 2013: 505)

My selection of stories, their re-telling and the narrative reflections also helped to shape the subsequent discussion in the final two chapters of the thesis.

### **Conducting contemporary narrative analysis: adopting a theatrical collaborative approach**

Andrews et al (2008) point out that some qualitative approaches offer more precise steps on how to analyse data, such as in discussion of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 2001) and phenomenological research (Husserl, 1999). Whilst narrative analysis (Chase, 2005) is often still considered a developing field, Franzosi (1998) locates steps for narrative analysis in first identifying the phenomenon, selecting who to interview and then the researcher collects the story or stories. From interviews prompting stories, the researcher is able to retell the story; and from collaboration with the storyteller, is able to re-present the story in her own words, selecting elements to recount and situating the context. From writing the story, the final step involves validating the integrity of the findings. The Personal Narratives Group (1989: 264) stressed that ‘while insisting that women’s personal narratives reveal truths, we still retain our responsibility as interpreters. These stories do not simply “speak for themselves”’, even though narratives may appear more focused on participants’ voices, narratives provide direct access to other times, places and cultures.

Critics of narrative analysis argue that it pretends to offer an ‘authentic voice’ and that strategic interest can influence how storytellers choose to connect events and make them meaningful for others (Riessman, 2003), undermining its validity as research. However, the transparency of narrative analysis can also be regarded as strength, since to ignore the location of the research within different power relations, would suggest that it is possible for the researcher to maintain neutrality or value-freedom. Whereas, as Christians (2000) argues that this may well reinforce existing power relations, in my rendering of the

women's stories, I was concerned to shed light on the effects of dominant social relations. In such circumstances, the location of their voices (personal voices) in research also becomes a political act.

I also faced dilemmas around the most appropriate forms for presenting the stories, and eventually for both one to one and group interviews, I opted to present the data in the form of scripts, as in acts and scenes in a play. In that way, I was able to group stories thematically and uncover and follow through the nuances in the storylines, also reflecting my own asides as narrator (or playwright). At the same time, each act represents a collective story of learning. I was guided in this by Chase's (2005) sociological approach to analysing narrative inquiry, which is framed in society and social contexts, where there are particular simultaneous elements. These allow collaboration between the researcher and the participants, in a place or series of places where commonalities, termed as: temporality, place and sociality, provide pathways to assist analysis. In place (settings), I heard the women's stories in their local environments where most carried out their volunteering roles; in temporality, I guided the women's focus between different past and present times in their learning journeys and in turn, they often directed my attention to stories of 'back home'. In engaging with sociality, I encouraged the women to express their feelings, their hopes and desires in terms of education and learning for themselves and others. These elements therefore guided and shaped the study's design, collection and subsequent presentation and analysis of data (see Appendix 6 for an example of my approach to coding and analysis). .

Chase (2005) also refers to a number of analytical lenses that contemporary narrative inquirers can use, including a distinct form of discourse - a way of shaping or ordering past experiences, as well as of understanding our own and others' actions in organising events and memories into a meaningful whole. Applying these ideas enabled me to connect and see the consequences of the women's actions and events over time. An example here is illustrated by the value that first generation African women attributed to education of a particular kind: the ultimate symbol of respect, an aspiration for their children, for themselves and for the wider black community.

Through retelling the women's narratives, with different fragments of the picture contributed through diverse speakers, I was able to communicate underlying reasons for this type of research. The narrative communicated the narrator's (researcher's) point of view, choosing which elements of the story are told and how; including, excluding and combining different elements; and revealing why a particular narrative is worth telling in the context of the research. Here narratives can also be seen to portray emotions and thoughts offering interpretations and further insights into stories told. In presenting the participant's account, the narrative researcher assumes narratives as verbal action – which can then be adopted or explained to entertain, inform, defend, complain, confirm or challenge the status quo (Chase, 2005).

The narrative interactions of the older black women in my study were seldom orderly and often disjointed, as they frequently resorted to stories of 'back home' or stories drawn from wider community experiences, subsequently returning to present experience, paralleling Hodgkinson's (2008) discussion of the haphazard ways that nuggets of life experiences are often related. Using the conceptual frameworks of narrative inquiry – the commonplaces of 'temporality, place and sociality' discussed above, further refined by Clandinin and Huber (2010), allowed me to draw meaning from some of these apparently haphazard events and experiences and to explore, for example, how past and present learning experiences connected (temporality). I was also able to explore personal feelings, hopes and desires and social issues, and in so doing recognised my insider role within the inquiry relationship. Understanding my role as a collaborator in exploring the narratives encouraged me to recognise the usefulness of the women's frequent deviations to ask questions of me, such as: 'Which part in Dominica your mother come from?' Such questions meant that I could not comfortably move on until I had given my answer. This was their test of me as researcher, in being willing to collaborate in the process by retaining some control or focus regardless of the theme of my question. This will be evident in several examples in the chapters that follow.

*Representation and black women's voices in the research*

The hardest task in beginning the process of conducting narrative analysis was to go through the huge amount of data which I had collected, particularly in the form of tape recorded group interviews which in each case took longer than two days to transcribe because of the variation in Caribbean dialects and the need to take account of who said what (Bryman and Teevan, 2005:200). In positioning myself as the narrator, I introduced scenes, made statements and comments, and provided focus; I interrupted to clarify and reflect upon meanings. In these ways, I deliberately placed myself in the storylines as one equipped with an overview and knowledge acquired from a wider range of interviews and visits to their projects. In addition, my second generation, African Caribbean identity was ever present as I reacted to critical issues in the storylines. When conducting my pilot study, the participants' voices (storylines) and my narrative (interpretation) seemed to represent two completely different stories and this made me consider more carefully ways that I could draw out and present the stories, acknowledging my own collaboration, in the main study. In my subsequent analysis, however, I was attentive to, and explored the strong themes that emerged from the narratives and which reflected my core areas of inquiry.

In conducting research with first generation African Caribbean women as previously stated, I could not divorce my own lived experiences, including feelings of educational marginalisation. As previously identified, the sociological approach of 'deprivatization' of personal experience highlights the wide-ranging institutional and organisational settings that shape the selves we live by. However, I treated the narratives presented by the women as unique stories of lived experiences, situated in specific histories, biographies and communities.

In summary I can conclude that narrative inquiry is the study of experience through a reflexive process in which the researcher has a significant role and is understood through the stories that individuals tell. Narrative inquiry and analysis therefore provides a significant means through which to construct new theoretical understandings of learning in the lives of older black women.

*Relevance for the chapters which follow*

In the next three chapters, I present the narrative reality (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001) prevalent in the stories told by first generation African Caribbean women learning in informal settings in the community.<sup>11</sup> It was in these settings, that I first wondered about the powerful nature of learning occurring in social networks and began to re-consider the question posited by Lave and Wenger (1991:14): ‘What kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place?’ Chapter 5 presents stories primarily from group interviews demonstrating the ways in which the women in my study learn alongside each other. In interviews, the women spoke sternly to each other in Caribbean patois and constantly challenged each other. Whilst joking with each other, their narratives are both profound and display the varied nuances of their lived experiences from different Caribbean islands. The women’s stories regularly featured themes such as: ‘back home’; ‘educating each other’; ‘learning from others’, allowing me to reflect upon the wider benefits of learning in later years.

All three chapters, which follow expose how strategies are passed on by older black women in ‘womanist ways’ through the conversations that take place between them and demonstrate how the women constantly discover new confidences through challenging and inspiring each other. The chapters also show how shared and individual cultural identities present themselves and how the women from the various Caribbean islands relate to each other in stories of ‘playing mas’; ‘talking labrish’; ‘mamaguising’<sup>12</sup> and in ‘making commess’.

Narrative reality (ibid, 2001) refers to the socially situated practice of storytelling and this implies that the contexts in which the women in my study tell their stories are as much a

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11 Throughout this chapter, when I refer to the ‘community’ or ‘their communities’, I am referring to communities of interest of older black women and men whose voices are often not heard and who share similar backgrounds and experiences and who often indicate that they feel marginalised by the wider communities in which they live. Concepts of community have been discussed further in chapters 2 and 3.

12 A term used to describe a particular way that older black Caribbean women are able to play tricks on others

part of this reality as the words recorded in my transcripts. Drawing on my fieldwork notes enabled me to recapture such narrative realities, in particular, location and settings, as I proceeded to make sense of the stories told by first generation African Caribbean women. In Chapters, 5, 6 and 7, my interactions with the women and their learning environments are captured in a series of stories presented in theatrical manner, employing Acts and Scenes to depict the various elements and plot lines in the stories and the settings in which they are told.

In positioning myself as the narrator, I introduce scenes, make statements, asides and narrative comments to provide focus, interrupt and reflect upon meanings. In this context, I have located myself in the storylines as the researcher who brings a specific overview and knowledge acquired from a range of interviews with different women at their projects and in their homes. In addition, my second-generation African Caribbean identity was ever present in reacting to critical issues in the storylines. Dwyer and Buckle (2009:55) explain this position by claiming that:

Postmodernism emphasizes the importance of understanding the researcher's context (gender, class, ethnicity, etc.) as part of narrative interpretation (Angrosino, 2005). By extension, researchers are increasingly making known their membership identity in the communities they study.

In the chapters, which present my data, my aim is to guide the reader through the stories organised through thematic Acts and scenes. In most cases the Act begins with a narrative introduction, where I prepare the storyline and contextualise the local setting and the narrative focus. I identify the precise topic of a dialogue and invariably draw attention to a single issue. In my narrative interruptions during the dialogue, I have positioned myself to intervene in the dialogue, sometimes to assert a particular position and sometimes to provide information to further understanding to the reader. In narrative reflections, I may question or consider a critical wider issue involving community or the realisation of personal benefits in learning. Throughout the Acts, I reflect on the critical issues raised both for the women (Rosenweld and Ochburg, 1992) and for others, which are explored further in Chapters 8 and 9.

The three chapters depict varied stories of informal learning in the community and include stories from the vast majority of the case study locations (Appendix 3). Each Act engages with critical themes such as humiliation, shame, poverty and on a particular learning challenge tackled by the women, sometimes highlighting satisfaction, elation and contentment through achievements. Each Act goes some way to shedding light on the many barriers to learning the women have experienced and how they have been able to overcome these. The data presented are drawn from a cross section of the interviews held in cities in the North of England, the South West, the Midlands and London. The following quote by bell hooks underlines some of the contexts which I will go on to depict in the subsequent chapters through the women's narratives, also reminding me of my research responsibility in representing other black women whose voices have previously been silenced from the academic discourse in the area of lifelong learning.

Marginality is a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse – it is found in the words, habits and the way one lives.....It is a site one clings to even when moving to the centre...it nourishes our capacity to resist... It is an inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity... (hooks, 1990:150)

## **Chapter 5: The heart of the Race<sup>13</sup>**

### **Introducing the Acts, explaining focus and sequence**

The first of nine Acts is a story of reading; the second, a story of conversation; and the third, a story of writing in the community. All nine Acts in the chapters which follow reveal (to greater or lesser degrees) the nature of the polyrhythmic realities prevalent in the interactions of first generation African Caribbean women participating in the study. At the beginning of each Act, I sought to present a picture of the locality where the interviews took place in order to situate participants. I provided an insight into the particular learning contexts or projects, such as learning in a community housing, city challenge regeneration area with a title such as ‘Learning for challenge’, before introducing some personal background to participants, usually emerging in the form of a critical narrative delivered by a woman in the study. The combination of preserving and presenting the original dialogue interspersed with narrative comments, allowed me to preserve the originality of the polyrhythmic realities occurring and to capture the distinct ways in which older black women learn and describe learning in particular types of communities of practice.

Practically, it was not possible to present all the stories, neither was it possible within the scope of this work to present full narratives, and in some cases, the Acts are brief and narrative comments serve to fill in gaps as the stories progress. However, the vast majority of interview locations across the 11 selected regions are represented in the stories of learning. In all the Acts, I begin with a narrative introduction, setting the scene before I engage in an aside or narrative comment, where I explain a topic or viewpoint related to the impending scene. Narrative reflections serve to highlight aspects of the

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<sup>13</sup> This title is taken from the publication (Bryan et al, 1985) of the same name – exploring black women’s activism in Britain.



research, which together with reflections at the end of each chapter, are discussed further in Chapters 8 and 9. At the start of each chapter, I offer a picture of the locality in which the interviews take place to give brief glimpses of how participants are located in terms of poverty, affluence and at times, class. I then provide an insight into the learning contexts before introducing some brief contextual background on participants. Once the context is clearer, I provide illustrative examples of the dialogue arising from a series of mainly group interviews. In my narrative reflections, I return to expose the relevance and connections of the stories that have been presented. The stories reveal frustrations in learning but are often of fond memories, of happier times, of hopes, of conflicts and struggles; and they invariably reveal plotlines which highlight both the significance of, and barriers to, learning in the women's lives. By presenting the narratives in this way, I have been able to interrogate story lines and demonstrate the nature of learning as it emerges through the stories presented.

### ***Preserving authenticity in the women's narratives***

The women interviewed regularly spoke to me, and to each other, using the present tense when often mainstream grammar would use past tenses. Their stories were littered with such 'differently' presented tenses in the form of: 'She try so hard' instead of, 'She tried so hard'; and: 'She send him to the auntie', meaning, 'She sent him to the auntie'. Despite my second generation African Caribbean heritage, other aspects of language and particular enunciations were sometimes challenging and difficult to decipher. However, in order to preserve the authenticity of the stories and capture the character and characteristics of individuals, I have chosen, throughout, not to correct Caribbean language and vocabulary since they depict a different reality and capture the diversity and nuances of language from across the Caribbean islands. At times, I have used my explanatory role as narrator to make meanings clearer to a wider readership. I have also made use of the dramatic present tense in introducing the Acts and Scenes.

## ***Act 1: Speaking up for sisters: A story of reading***

### *Narrative Introduction*

This Act contains seven scenes and Scene one offers a brief snapshot of the women's informal learning environment described by the narrator (interviewer) who also describes the visual displays on show, which highlights the women's memories of early arrival to the UK. As the researcher enters the interview room, a photograph of a woman with an open book is the focus of particular attention. Scene two reveals certain boundaries vehemently guarded by the women (related to what they were not prepared to discuss and how they wished to be known). Scene three depicts the women's rejection of the term 'African Caribbean', in favour of 'West Indian'. In Scene four, the women provide insights into the nature of activities within the project; whilst in Scene five, one woman introduces the importance of a particular book in her life. In Scene six, the same woman describes her early experiences of humiliation in the classroom; and, finally, in Scene seven, the significance of the book which was the focus of attention in Scene two is exposed as a source of strength in overcoming an inability to read in adult life. The Act provides initial insights into polyrhythmic reality at play in the sisterly banter evident in the women's social interactions.

### **Act 1: Scene 1: Approaching the learning environment:**

Narrator: Twilight set on a seemingly quiet residential street in the heart of multicultural Meads<sup>14</sup>, and as I walked alongside a stylish row of social housing, I was making my way towards the 'Staying for Now' Black Elders' Project. Whilst standing at the front door, I heard the loud screams and laughter of West Indian women engaged in lively banter. I could detect the variations in the West Indian dialects, from the Bajan shrill, to the curt Jamaican patois and then to the audible sound of deep Kittician swagger. I marvelled at

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14 The actual name of the city is disguised in order to protect the identity of the women in the study.

what I considered an unusual mixing of Caribbean women in one informal social setting in the North of England.

*Introducing the characters (ages and islands of birth):*

Elcina (52, Grenada)

Tilley (72, Jamaica)

Anselma (71, St Lucia)

Pamela (65, Jamaica)

Patricia (68, Barbados)

Mary (70, St Kitts)

The younger woman (Elcina) in the group moved hurriedly to greet me at the door and still laughing said, in an unexpected Yorkshire accent: ‘They’re a bit lively today’.

As she drew me into the small hall, she went on to say, ‘Yes, they’re all preparing for Black History Month.’<sup>15</sup> I moved forward and peered closely at the colourful table adorned with what I could only describe as treasures which could have been lifted from my mother’s front room: the familiar plastic flowers, the large, blue glass fish ornament and the tall painting of the light-skinned, near naked, black woman with her long hair pulled to one side of her face. All these items represented, apparently, happier times for my mother and the women and could have come from any number of West Indian mothers’ front rooms in 1950s and 1960s Britain.

I drew closer to the display and gazed at the subject of the intense laughter. One woman (Tilley) held this prized possession in her hands – a black and white photograph of an

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15 In many ethnically diverse areas of the UK, Black History Month is held each year in the month of October and black people’s successes as well as struggles at a local, national and international level are celebrated. It invariably features workshops, talk, music, song and dance and discussions on the impact of slavery on Black African peoples.

elegant lady sat on a sofa with pointed-toe shoes and long, white, narrow rimmed spectacles. She wore a white dress and had one open hand neatly positioned on an open book, which was strategically placed in her lap. Her other hand was clutching an empty champagne glass which was pressing against her face. I will be returning to this image in later chapters.

### **Act 1: Scene 2: Memories of the front line**

Tilley: But what you was reading there Ms Anselma?

She mischievously shouted out above the laughter.

*Aside:* The happy scene comes to a rather abrupt ending. The interviewer approaches the women. Laughter ceases. One woman (Pamela) speaks. Her tone is curt and serious.

If you coming to talk 'bout slavery – don't bother cum here wid dat!

*Aside:* On hearing this sharp statement, the interviewer appears concerned about possible problems with the impending interviews.

The women resume their previous discussion.

Mary: She used to be pretty you know.

*Aside:* Laughter by all

Tilley: If you see walk she did walk in here them shoes.

Patricia: But you no easy Miss Anselma.

*Aside:* Patricia is now laughing profusely at her own statement.

Narrative comment:

Full of excitement, Tilley was in upbeat mode about the memories she was sharing with others about her antics at the blues dances alongside her long-time friend Anselma, always by her side (and today next to her) and getting ready to take part in the oral history project for Black History month. The women had one week to prepare their

visual images of ‘Liming on the frontline’ for the ‘Over60s Caribbean Group’, and were about to take a break to share with me their learning stories. In the women’s narratives which follow, the interviewer gained insights into informal learning, and the work of the project.

### **Act 1: Scene 3: Emphasising ethnic heritage**

Group interviews: the women’s narratives

Narrative comment: From the outset whilst re-introducing my research with emphasis on first generation African Caribbean women, it became clear to the interviewer that the participants had concerns.

Pamela: We are West Indians!

*Aside:* Pamela declares this sharply with loud support from the other women.

Anselma: But of course we are.

Elcina: But there are women from Africa who also volunteer at the centre.

Mary: Yes but we are not Africans?

*Aside:* Not Africans is repeated by the other women.

Narrative comment: I will reflect on these assertions later in this chapter.

### **Act 1: Scene 4: Learning activities**

*Aside:* In group interviews, the women talk about what they do at the centre and some of the benefits of learning:

Tilley: I think the ‘Staying for Now’ project is good because it keeps our minds alive. We can remember things together and if we were not together we would not remember.

Anselma can remind us how to look up things on the internet and how to open up a document. She is very good like that. But I come here once a month for the Carnival

committee meetings – I don't get involved in all that jump up (laugh) and playing mas<sup>16</sup> and so on, but they like to get us oldies involved because we are original Caribbeans.

*Aside:* The researcher heard more about the work of the project and how they were involved with others in their community, from a group discussion, with different participants 'chipping in' on what they gained from participating.

Mary: They watched some of the film about the great British black invasion and I talked to them about my experience and Anselma talked about anancy stories and the photographs that they had displayed.

Patricia: Lots of things we did not know before because they show the film in sections and every time there is something new. I do like going out and doing these things because it makes me forget my diabetes.

*Aside:* She laughs at her statement

Anselma: The pleasure of working together with other West Indian women who are not afraid to speak their minds is a powerful thing for me. I feel very good about having this opportunity to express myself how I want to and not to feel shy about it. I get some good feedback – no not always good (laugh) – mostly bad from her! (Laughing louder) I know that life in this country was hard at first for all of us and in some ways it is still hard but we have stuck together and have shared many things together and it's nice that we can really do rewarding things now. We still learn a lot from each other. I feel a sense of purpose when I am with the other women and enjoy what I do even though it is very hard work just having to come here sometimes.

*Aside:* All the women are laughing.

*Narrative comment:* As the discussion developed, the importance of the group, the shared dialogue and experiences started to emerge, alongside both more concrete learning experiences and personal motivations.

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16 A Caribbean carnival expression – meaning having fun, masquerading and dancing in the streets

In responses to my questions, I heard about the women's reasons for attending, alongside insights into their personal lives. I also learnt about the women's attitudes to the behaviour of young students that they came into contact with whilst volunteering.

Tilley: They don't misbehave not like at the college where they have their feet on the chairs and the teachers don't say nothing. They have more respect for us down there. They have no manners at the college but at the university the young students have manners. I like them better.

Elcina: They have manners at the school too.

Tilley: Yes, until they get into the gangs.

*Aside:* The Interviewer is now about to hear from the woman 'talked about' in Scene 2

### **Act 1: Scene 5 Anselma's story: Personal account of a learning journey**

Narrative introduction: In my one-to-one interview with Anselma, who was the subject in the photograph and the key reason for the excitement in Scene 2, I uncovered feelings of anxiety, frustration, sadness and shame but also of pride, determination and hope.

Anselma: I brought along my book, 'Sense and Sensibility' that I had since then.

Interviewer: How did the book help you back then?

Anselma: This was really and truly the start of my learning.

Interviewer: What parts of the book did you find interesting?

Anselma: You don't know how that book did make me feel.

Narrative comment: I wanted to find out more about Anselma's possible learning from the book and what it meant to her but initially the responses I had hoped to gain were not forthcoming.

Interviewer: Back then, what was in the book that made you treasure it so much?

Anselma: That book really helped me a lot.

Narrative comment: Anselma had either not understood my question or she was deliberately not acknowledging my need to know. I considered my question and its possible judgemental leaning. Was it that I was more interested in why this particular book would be of interest to an older black Caribbean woman? I convinced myself it would not have been of interest to my own mother.

However, the plotline suddenly emerged and I finally realised that Anselma had clearly understood what was meant by my question. Visibly weighing up how far to trust me, she closed her eyes for a few seconds and said:

Anselma: I had this book but I could not read it back then, I did not know how to.

Narrative reflection:

I had shifted from insider to outsider and back again and as a researcher, I did not initially understand Anselma's hesitations. However, Wengraf's (2001) research into the nature of the 'Telling of the story' offered helpful insights into my reflections:

the 'telling' is as important as the 'told', since we are concerned with reconstructing the subjectivity (the Real Author) that is struggling to tell and not-tell over the duration – and through the process -- of the telling of the told. The significance of the 'telling' can lie as much or more in the 'asides', in patterns of apparently trivial idiosyncratic expression. (Wengraf, 2007:3)



Anselma: Yes the book was really of no use to me back then.

She went on:

But I always knew I would be able to read it one day.

Narrative comment: suddenly I realised the curious and fulfilling role that the ‘Staying for Now’ project was playing.

It had taken Anselma a great deal of time before she eventually shared with the other volunteers at the project her lack of confidence in reading. Once she was able to do this, she progressed swiftly.

The strap line in the project leaflet had read:

Reading is useful; take your turn to read for pleasure at the ‘Staying for Now’ project.

Anselma: But now I have been slowly reading it and I get to read aloud as well

(laughs)

She went on:

And don’t mind the others – they like to hear my voice.

### **Act 1: Scene 6: Anselma’s story: humiliation in the classroom**

Anselma: Nowadays I want to learn as much as I can. I come to the project to write with others and to get some more computer skills. When I was back home growing up, the other girls had a lot going. Their hair was always nice because every day they could have it plaited. I was poor and when you were that poor you did not have your hair plaited every day and you did not go to school much and when you did, you was always late, because you was always working in the yard. Sometime my grandfather would say, ‘It’s time for school to finish’ as he wanted me in the house by a certain time and I know what that was for – to have the food on the table for him.

The teachers back home – they well and truly ruled. They could say anything to you and get away with it. If they were not serious they would be sarcastic with you and you could not even answer back (not that you would). I really suffered with one named Teacher Belcher who for no reason was so fastey<sup>17</sup> to me. That day when he asked me to stand up in front of the class and spell the word ‘black’ – I remember it so well. At the time I was thinking, why is he asking me? I could not really see the point then. He already did know that I could not read. I felt so humiliated. All the other children were laughing at me. This was on account that I was very black and ugly. I hated going to school to be humiliated in that way but he was the only teacher. He just used to like making fun of me and it was very hurtful. I just stopped trying from then.

Narrative comment: Discrimination on the basis of skin colour (Gabriel, 2007) has for some time been considered an issue in the Caribbean. In this context, the lighter skinned individual in the Caribbean is often favoured in positions of power in a whole range of areas, particularly in politics and in the media and is significant in accessing social resources and social capital. In Anselma’s case, her teacher (Mr Belcher), a light-skinned black man, employed this form of ‘black on black racism’ overtly and it became a major de-motivating factor in Anselma’s willingness to learn to read, impacting on her lifelong education and learning.

I went back to examine my transcript of the group interview to appreciate how Anselma’s past experiences were impacting on her interactions with others in the project.

### **Act 1: Scene 7: Reading and learning**

Aside: A group interview is taking place.

Interviewer: What was the book you were reading over and over again?

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17 West Indian slang – meaning cheeky, and rude

Anselma: 'Sense and Sensibility'. My aunt who was a teacher gave it to me before she died. She was ill for a long time and I felt so good when she gave me that book. She had no children and I was her favourite. I brought the book to England with me and I have kept it ever since. Because she always called me her young lady – now I know why. I like reading about the English ways.....I enjoyed reading all the good things...the different life...it was like a fairy tale to me. I still think of English people like that sometimes....the real English people... You know everyone with manners and everything – but not anymore – I see all sorts of English people now! (laughing)

Interviewer: What did you learn from reading the book?

Tilley: She never read the book. Only now she just reading the book!

Anselma: Yes I read the book, but it was only when I look at it now that I really take it in – what it was like then... I never really thought then that there were books that were written differently, about different types of people. I was reading just for the sake of reading. Now I took it to the first writer's meeting because they asked us to bring something that was important reading to us. Yes I still have the book but it's true you know.....I never did really read it then.

Tilley: See what I telling you!

Interviewer: So Anselma – What did you learn from the book?

Anselma: About the upper class, posh people with lots of money who look down their noses on the rest of the people.

Pamela: In a way but that was the way it was.

Patricia: You want to see the book. She wrap it up nice and it was so old.

Anselma: Nearly 60 years old you know. Having that book was good for my learning.

Interviewer: Really? What was it about that book that made you hold on to it for so long?

Anselma: I just knew that as long as I had it – I would be important – when I was young. They saw me like somebody. It made me think I was clever – even though I was not! (Laughing)

***Narrative reflection:***

Whilst reflecting on Anselma's story, I realised how important it was to have allowed her the opportunity to present her thoughts in her own time and at her own pace, enabling the mystery behind her story to unfold. I was then able to uncover a number of perspectives revealing the full significance of the treasured book. Such different perspectives included: status, aspiration, hope, joy and pride. The status in possessing the book, despite not being able to read it, was important to Anselma, as it signified aspiration. The joy and hope were clearly evident in the pose for an important photograph (Scenes 1 and 2) taken soon after her arrival in the UK, where the very same open book took pride of place. The title and content of the book represented pride and a proud association with England and Englishness. But all this was perhaps far from the inaccessible learning culture, which Anselma seemed to have encountered prior to acquiring increased social capital as a result of her association with the 'Staying for Now' project.

***Act 2: Speaking up for community: A story of conversation***

**Narrative Introduction**

This Act contains 7 Scenes. Scene 1 introduces the cosmopolitan, volatile local environment in which the community centre is located and where another set of interviews were to take place. Scene 2 describes the cultural features of the project and centre and its community learning setting, and exposes the nature of the researcher's initial encounter with her research participants. Scene 3 describes the participants' insistence on focusing on a mother's sacrifice and commitment to educating her son, who now struggles with day to day living in the community. In Scene 4, the participants discuss their informal learning activities within the 'Elders Talk' project and how they are able to discuss and share their history. Scene 5 presents the women's learning of modern

day slavery on a sugarcane plantation – ‘back home’ – on one West Indian Island; and Scene 6 provides further insights of events occurring ‘back home’ as the women recount stories of poverty and social class. In Scene 7, the women discuss a boy’s ‘wasted education’ and return to a mother’s disappointment set against the high expectation she placed on her son’s achievement at the expense of her own educational aspirations.

*Introducing the main characters (volunteers at Elders Talk) (ages and islands of origin):*

Key characters:

Edith (64, St Kitts)

Volunteer worker, disabled, co-ordinates the women’s oral history stories.

Rosamond (74, St Lucia)

Volunteer at Elders Talk and awarded a community champion award by the local council, mother of Jonetta

Shirley (71, St Lucia)

Member of Elders Talk

Jonetta (53, St Lucia)

Elders Talk Project worker, organises the learning project

Minnie (54, Jamaica)

Cook at Elders Talk luncheon club, mother of Haratio

Cindy (61, St Vincent)

Makes and serves the tea at Elders Talk

Other characters:

Maud (68, Guyana)

Rosa: (67, Trinidad)

Sylvia: (72, Barbados)

Dell: (66, Jamaica)

Cynthia: (52, Dominica)

Lilly: (80, Barbados)

Mildred: (80, Dominica)

June: (55, Jamaica)

Marlene (69, Antigua)

## **Act 2: Scene 1: Approaching the informal learning centre**

Narrative introduction:

Narrator: A little way out of the underground station I could hear familiar cries from the bedraggled black man:

‘Spare couple change; spare couple change.’

I thought I was late for my meeting and rushed up the road as the rain came down heavily, on a previously sunny but blustery October afternoon. I held my coat over my head and simultaneously searched my crowded handbag for an umbrella whilst rushing courageously towards the busy, Harltonvale roundabout. I stood in the centre and contemplated the tall blocks of social housing and hoped that this time round I would make the right choice and take the exit to the tenants’ hall on the ground floor of Blethen House. Clinging onto my A4 folders containing my carefully prepared consent forms and information sheets, I headed in search of the council block which housed the black women’s Elders Talk group, where I was about to hear the stories of learning in this

notorious, cosmopolitan area of North West London. As I rushed across the pavement towards a vaguely familiar entrance, I dropped my open shoulder bag and could see a young oriental man from the corner of my left eye calling out ‘DVD, DVD’; I was also aware of a group of men approaching to my right, swaying and chanting loudly as they drank from beer cans. I saw a group of youths directly opposite me, at the side of a shop, wearing hoods and further on, at the next corner I saw four young, anxious-looking women shielding from the rain and smoking under the canopy of the corner café. It was at this precise moment that I noticed that the contents of my bag were on show, exposing my mobile phone, tape recorder, tapes and the folding umbrella that I had been searching for. I quickly shouted out to the youths: ‘Where is the entrance to the tenant’s hall?’ I called out in a cheery, high pitched voice. I heard a muttered response and hurriedly gathered up my possessions, following the direction of the pointed finger to the ramp.

Walking assertively down the walkway, I removed my coat from my head and held on tightly to my bag as I listened intently for oncoming steps behind me as the rain poured down more heavily over the open walkway to the flats.

## **Act 2: Scene 2: ‘The boy set himself off again’: conflicts and barriers to learning**

Narrator: I made my way to the large ramp providing wheelchair access to the ground floor council building and immediately recognised the silver haired, dark-skinned Edith, walking out with a large, awkwardly covered plate of hot food in one hand and waving her trademark walking stick up in the air with the other. ‘I coming back, I coming back just now’ she shouted across to me, laughing away in her usual, humorous manner. ‘Am I early?’ I shouted back to Edith – ‘Not exactly’ she shouted back: ‘The boy set himself off again this morning, police and everyting down here’. And then she seemed to just disappear past the lifts and out of sight.

I entered the hall to the sound of clanging cutlery, a hive of activity and the aroma of freshly cooked ‘rice and pease’ being served up by Minnie. I realised I was in fact early for the start of the after-lunch focus group meeting that I had so carefully prepared for. I tried to compose myself after a rather rushed entrance and sat at an empty table at the back, away from the activities. I observed how the hall looked so very different

compared to when I first came down here for my meeting with Edith, a volunteer worker with Elders Talk. That cold morning, she had taken me around a large lifeless space occupied by only one woman and a smartly dressed young man in a white suit, busily preparing food in the open front kitchen at the far end of the hall. Today, I observed the excitable members of Elders Talk Caribbean luncheon club as they lined up to be served their meal from a large lady in a bright red green and gold cap bearing the words ‘Trust me!’

In the background, I could hear the crackling sound system and the speakers being prepared as a Bob Marley tune became gradually louder: ‘Saying don’t worry bout a thing, cos every little thing’s gonna be alright...’<sup>18</sup>

I sat in the hall and marvelled at the comfortable, reassuring scene and wondered why, as a second generation African Caribbean woman, I should ever feel fearful in an environment with which I could resonate so deeply. I pondered on Edith’s words: ‘The boy set himself off again’.

What did she mean by that?

A friendly voice interrupted my thoughts:

You want a cup of tea darling? It asked.

Oh yes please, (I replied) –one sugar.

As I leant over to find my purse the woman (Cindy) said:

Is alright, and then: But £3 for the food....you can pay more if you like, she said with a mischievous smile.

*Narrative comment:*

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18 Lyrics of the song: ‘Three Little Birds’ by Bob Marley and The Wailers



I looked around me at the faces of happy smiling women on the walls and read one newspaper caption: 'Our story – our community champion' and saw an image of a tall, blond, middle aged woman wearing a large gold mayoral chain and could make out an Asian male handing over a certificate to a serious looking black woman dressed in an African robe and wearing an impressive head-dress. I wondered if this certificate holder would be here today, to participate in the discussion.

Aside: Elders Talk holds monthly workshops entitled: 'Our Community, Our Stories' for older black women to present their stories. The women are encouraged to hear and discuss each other's stories, told in person or via carefully prepared VHS or audio tape recordings.

*Narrative comment:*

I sipped my strong tea whilst I waited for Edith to return and listened to the women talk about the disruption which caused the delay in their weekly activities. I heard one voice say sharply:

'Dem go lock him up tight this time'.

### **Act 2: Scene 3: A focus on Horatio – Background to learning**

Interviewer: So you have all had a rather trying time this morning I gather. What happened?

Aside: The responses came all at once:

Maud: Yes. What a time.

Rosa: Me dear child.

Edith: The boy is so helpful.

Rosa: Always by his mother's side.

Maud: The boy head not right.

Sylvia: Not right.

Maud: Not right at all.

*Aside:* This is repeated and stressed by the women.

Rosa: Him well mix up.

Dell: It's the drugs!

Edith: The boy don't take drugs.

Rosa: Him taking the drugs well.

Cindy: Of course.

*Aside:* This is also repeated by several women.

Edith: What evidence you have of that?

Cindy: This is the drugs capital of London. You no hear what the Council Leader say?

Dell: See it there! Cindy say it all.

***Narrative reflection:***

Whilst engaged in their own polyrhythmic realities, it seemed like it would take some time before the women would get to the point where the events of the morning would become clearer, so I decided to guide them back to the agreed discussion.

Interviewer: So you are here to talk about your learning in the community?

Cindy: Which part in Dominica your mother come from?

*Aside:* This woman directs her question at the interviewer.

Edith: She resemble Beverly eh?

Cindy: She have it hard with that boy child you know, and she was managing so well on her own.

*Aside:* Cindy had returned to the previous discussion.

Narrative reflection:

Such were the distractions in the research process, and my carefully prepared prompts for the group interviews appeared like a parallel, somewhat irrelevant conversation with myself.

*Aside:* The women continue to ignore the interviewer's questions.

Edith: She wanted to go to university but instead she sacrifice her life for that boy.

Cindy: From the day the Social Worker step in, that's when the trouble start.

Cynthia: It was just waiting to happen.

Lilly: The boy was well bright but the drugs take over.

Narrative comment: I realised the women wanted to take their own time to respond to my question but I persisted in trying to re-focus the discussion.

## **Act 2: Scene 4: Learning about our history from women in our community**

Interviewer: And so, how are you learning in the community?

*Aside:* The interviewer asked, speaking loudly over the women.

'We are proud of our project' said a loud stern voice from the far end.

*Aside:* The voice came from a woman (Rosamond) wearing ethnic dress and a Caribbean head wrap who was sat in the single armchair throughout the interview but and who had not engaged in the earlier conversations.

*Aside:* As she speaks, there is gradual silence from the other women as she seemed to command a certain level of respect from them.

Interviewer: Tell me about your project.

*Aside:* The interviewer is relieved and encouraged by her acknowledgement finally.

Interviewer: Hello

*Aside:* The interviewer looks carefully at the woman and vaguely recognises her from the photograph on the wall.

Rosamond: We talk about our history –‘back home’, we go way back and we talk of now.

*Aside:* The woman speaks knowledgeably and with a calm, slightly ostentatious tone to her voice.

Rosamond: We put our history on the map.

Interviewer: How do you do that?

Shirley: Look at this.

*Aside:* Another woman pushes a VHS tape into the hand of the interviewer. She has come clearly prepared for the meeting.

Interviewer: Is this about the project?

Shirley: It is my story about Crownlands.

Interviewer: Oh, tell me about your story.

Shirley: You have to watch the film.

*Aside:* The interviewer wonders where she would find the appropriate equipment to watch a VHS tape as she would rather connect it to the stories recounted while she is there.

Interviewer: And so – How are you learning in the project?

*Aside:* The interviewer asked the question to all the women.

**Act 2: Scene 5: Learning about slavery in our lifetime**

Narrative introduction: I looked over at the fine featured woman with pointed nose, dark skin and short black loose curls under a pink woolly hat. I was about to interview her. Other women joined in.

Shirley: I am Shirley and I am a Dougl<sup>19</sup>.

Interviewer: What is a Dougl?

*Aside:* The interviewer is pretending to be unfamiliar with this expression which she has heard on several occasions from her mother.

Shirley: Half black and half Indian.

Interviewer: And what is Crownlands? You mentioned it earlier.

Shirley: The sugarcane plantation – ‘back home’. It was owned by the King and then the Queen of England. It is on the island of St Lucia. The land is still there but not the regime. It was slavery. My sister lived in the BaHals – the barracks – one long long building with a separate unit for each family. They did all their cooking, eating and sleeping there and there was a big shop where they bought their provisions and they took it out of their pay.

Mildred: They tell me when you went to visit someone – you had to walk right from one end of the BaHal to get to the family unit and then walk all the way down the BaHal to get out again.

Cindy: They just gave the family boxes to sleep on. It was terrible in there. Sometimes there were 8 members of one family in one small unit. Like a prison.

Interviewer: Is the building still there?

Mildred: No – gone long time. Mash down.

Cindy: It was still there in 1978 when I went back for Ma Betty’s funeral.

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19 A Caribbean person of African and Indian descent

Mildred: You lie.

Cindy: Yes indeed. The plantation dungeons.

Interviewer: So when did it stop?

Mildred: Well that's for you to find out. You should be telling us young lady!

Cindy: When did slavery stop?

Rosamond: It was not slavery. It gave them a living. It gave them work

Cindy: Oh, you are so cantankerous sometimes!

***Narrative comment:***

I heard from the women that the British slave masters had built sugarcane barracks on the island – one in Cul de Sac, another in Fonde, and another in San Susie. There were many grandfathers working on the plantation. When the black slaves fled and hid in the bushes, attempts to find them proved fruitless. A mandate was eventually introduced to bring in workers ('slaves') from Calcutta in India and the 3 barracks became dominated by Asian workers. Many intermarried with the local black African Caribbean population and created what is commonly known in some parts of the Caribbean islands as Dougla (half black and half Indian).

On the islands, the people living in the barracks (The BaHals in Bexon) were looked upon as the lowest of the low, poverty stricken and of a very low class. However, many saved what was left out of the meagre sums paid out to them for food and other basic provisions. Today, their descendants are some of the richest and most respected families on the island – owning some very important local businesses.

***Narrative reflection:***

The women in 'Elders Talk' came to the UK from different parts of the Caribbean islands had clearly been learning from each other. I myself had never thought deeply of my

grandparents' generation as experiencing slavery. My grandfather was born in 1894 and his father would have been enslaved in British colonial terms.

## **Act 2: Scene 6: Learning about the BaHals**

One-to-one interview With Jonetta (Elders Talk, project worker):

Interviewer: So you have quite a connection with Crownlands?

Jonetta: I was born in the Caribbean in 1958 but came over to the UK as a baby with my mother. My mother's father went on to live in the same housing that his father (a Crownlands plantation worker) was living in and where my maternal grandmother gave birth to my own mother. But mother had sweepingly talked about the BaHals and, for me it meant a form of housing for the poor. After learning more about it from the other women in the project, I asked an older family relatives about it and found out that my mother actually lived there as a very young child. I had stumbled on something which my mother had never ever told me about.

Interviewer: So the project revealed something to you?

Jonetta: I heard about it all the time but I never knew it was so near where my mother lived in Bexon and yes, I have only found out where it was since the women have been telling their stories. When it was ever mentioned it seemed like it was some place far away – like Souffriere – which is on the other side of the island. My mother was only a child when she lived there but she is constantly cursed by my father's family for coming from the Bahals. They see her as not being worthy of being part of my Dad's family because of where her family came from. That is so wrong.

Interviewer: Why do you think your mother did not talk about it?

Jonetta: Well it is very clear to me now. My mother is a Dougla and a very proud woman. It must have been awful living in the halls back then but then she was only a very small child. But I can see the huge stigma attached to having come from the BaHals – it is immense. When my uncles and aunts would say that my mother was a 'poor Bexon girl' – I would always wonder why they would say that because they were also

from Bexon – but they did not live in the BaHals. I know now that my family were living there until 1939 but many other families had saved and gotten out and built their modest houses much earlier. She will never tell the other women she lived there.

Interviewer: What fascinating history. Will you be talking to your mother about this new information that you have found?

Jonetta: No, I think it will upset her too much – me bringing it up. My mother is good at giving talks and just last month, she received the community champion award for her work as a volunteer and for ‘talking large’ to people all over the place. She is quite a legend around here. No, I don’t want to upset her by talking about the BaHals!

Narrative comment:

Jonetta appeared to be protective of her mother Rosamond, and seemed to have been sensitive to her mother’s need to disassociate herself from the BaHals, recognising its obvious association with poverty. The BaHals also presented a sensitive class issue, denoting the stigma of poorer class or potentially the idea of an ‘underclass’ in the Bexon community. Rosamond was unlikely to have been proud of that period in her life, and this explained why Jonetta knew nothing of that fact that her mother actually lived there as a child. Jonetta expressed that she did not want to upset her mother by telling her what she had learnt. Her mother was an assertive woman, and with a great deal of pride and seemed to command a great deal of respect among the women volunteers. Rosamond was clearly proud of her status as a community champion and when she spoke the other women remained silent and appeared to carefully listen to her words. Although in the same room, she did not engage in the discussion with the other women as if she was placing herself on a higher level. This reserve may have been a way that she overcame her potential sense of earlier inferiority.

## **Act 2: Scene 7: ‘Wasted education’**

Narrative comment: Turning back to talk to some of the other women, they reverted to the original topic of conversation. I decided to see how this would evolve and what would emerge around ideas of learning.



Cynthia: She try and try very hard with the boy. The girls was so good but they gone way with their education and left her with the boy.

June: But not her child?

Marlene: She try so hard with him but all that education and he don't amount to nothing.

Cynthia: You can't say that. The boy is good to his mother. But they should stay and help the mother – they just went away.

Edith: And the boy was a nice mannersable boy as well.

Cynthia: But the boy is ungrateful.

June: It is a crying shame.

Interviewer: Sounds so very sad.

Edith: When you see him like that, you must say nothing. You have to put up with the noise. Just leave him alone. You can say hello but don't disrespect him. Ignore him and pretend you don't see him. Minnie is a very disciplined, organised and reliable woman but when she get mad, she provoke him about his education. You can't rebuke that boy. She can't stop humiliating the boy. He was doing well to get in university and had a good opportunity and she wanted so much to go to university herself. He just wasted his education.

Cindy: They deport him twice. Once from Jamaica and the other time from New York.

Interviewer: From Jamaica?

Cindy: She send him to his grandmother – it never work.

Edith: She send him to the aunty in New York – he carry on bad there too.

Interviewer: Deported from New York?

Edith: Yes to England. He was born right here. Yes, Middlesex hospital – just down the road.

Cindy: The same hospital dat destroy his life.

Edith: All that education.

Dell: He is always by her side.

Rosamond: He is her life – right here at the centre.

***Narrative reflection:***

It was then that I realised that Horatio was the smartly dressed young man in the white suit that I had seen in the kitchen on my first visit, helping his mother, Minnie, prepare lunch for the members of Elders Talk.

But what of Edith's reference to: set himself off?

*Aside:* Towards the end of the interview with Cindy, the interviewer asks about the incident that morning.

Interviewer: Why were the police here this morning?

Cindy: Minnie let rip into Horatio again.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Cindy: She was cursing him and calling him 'rubbish' and saying how he wasted his education and he just set himself off and this was not the first time.

Interviewer: His mother?

Cindy: His mother is in charge of organising the meals at the luncheon clubs. He gets epileptic fits when he is severely upset. He had a 'runnings' with his mother this morning. The last time it happened, we were preparing for the second year of the Harlstonvale carnival when Horatio was about to give his talk. He set himself off bad that day. Screaming, cursing and shouting at everybody.

Narrative reflection:

The area of North West London where the women volunteer is notorious for youth gangs; robbery and ‘black on black’ crime. When the police received a call concerning a young black man ‘causing trouble’, apparently they came to the scene in large numbers.

‘He set him off again’ – meant that he caused himself to become distressed and act in an agitated manner. It also implied that he was to blame for becoming agitated – not his mother, not the police, not anyone else but himself. However, the explanations given, as I heard them, were that ‘she’ (Minnie) had probably set him off again. She may have taken her frustration out on him and, whilst loyal and supportive to his mother, Horatio was aware of her disappointment with the outcome of his education. Other comments suggested that he might be suffering from depression as a result of failures and disappointments in his own life and his inability to make Minnie proud of him. But despite inferences, the Elders Talk members provided sisterly support to Minnie. In the women’s eyes, Minnie was considered right to talk to her son in whatever way she chose, not that perhaps Horatio may have had a particular problem, such as epilepsy or depression. In the women’s eyes, he was ‘born here’ and expected to do better.

‘They ran away with their education and left her with the boy’.

Horatio’s siblings seemed to have done well but had also come under criticism for leaving too much responsibility with their mother. It was evident that Minnie had placed significant importance on educating her children at the expense of her own education.

‘She wanted to go to university but she sacrificed her life for that boy?’

Minnie’s story (as told by others) highlighted the conflict of different aspirations and roles: motherhood and access to education.

### **Act 3: Speaking to represent: A story of writing in the community**

#### *Narrative introduction:*

The final Act in this chapter provides a marked contrast to the earlier stories where the majority of the women have spoken in their own Caribbean dialects about particular situations. This Act moves to a situation where the Caribbean roots of the participants are

not always clear in the ‘middle class’ voices of the participants until, through passion and excitement the women revert to displaying their polyrhythmic realities and use the language of ‘back home’ and Caribbean patois.

Characters (the women volunteers)

Deloris: (59, Jamaica)

Madge: (57, Barbados)

Trudy: (55, St Vincent)

Gloria: (77, Jamaica)

Flora: (78, Jamaica)

### **Act 3: Scene 1: Approaching the location**

Narrative comment

I drove down a leafy suburban road in Sunnyvale, Drovehampton on a crisp bright Saturday morning to conduct my one-to-one interview at the home of the chairperson of the local African Caribbean Women’s Centre. I pulled up alongside a large semi-detached house with white pillars and could not fail to see the bright red, shiny sports car parked in the driveway. As I sat behind the wheel of my Volkswagen polo, I wondered whether or not to park alongside the red Nissan Sports but, instead, chose to look for a discreet parking space lower down the road. After parking and whilst walking back up the road to the house, I witnessed an assortment of similar looking large houses with cars parked in the driveways and observed that there were, in fact, very few places for visitors to park. On pressing the whimsical doorbell, I noticed the small marble plaque to the right of the front door bearing the words: Sunningvale Villa and wondered if this was the only appropriately named house on the road.

Aside: A few seconds later, someone comes to greet the interviewer at the front door and is now vigorously shaking her hands.

**Act 3: Scene 2: Welcome**

‘Welcome, do come in’

Aside: Spoken by a tall, slim, ‘light-skinned’, older black woman, wearing a long cream coloured dress

‘We are all in the kitchen, waiting for you’

Aside: The woman speaks with a regal, but assertive, tone to her voice

***Narrative comment:***

I was a little taken aback by the mention of ‘We’ as I was under the impression that I was about to conduct a one-to-one interview with just one person (Deloris Hunt) but I waited before clarifying further. Most of the women I was unexpectedly about to interview might be perceived as black middle class. They all had children educated at university level, owned their own homes and were now volunteering for pleasure in the community. Deloris arrived in the UK with her mother as a toddler and experienced the British education system.

On entering the spacious hallway, I noticed the glamorous studio photographs of Deloris lining the walls and was about to compliment her when she swiftly ushered me through the modestly furnished lounge, adorned with a large framed photograph of a young male dressed in graduation robe and cap, holding onto his degree certificate. ‘Come through, come through’ she beckoned as she walked me down to the open plan kitchen – ‘my mother could not resist being part of this’, she said. ‘And Madge has something to say as well’. Well, I thought to myself – something to say – about what precisely? And who was Madge?

Deloris: I want you to meet everyone and yes they are all from the Caribbean and can share their thoughts with you and no – they don't mind you recording the interview. As volunteers at the Women's Centre, they are quite used to that kind of thing anyway.

(Laughs)

Deloris: You and I can then have a one-to-one later on.

*Aside:* The interviewer thinks quickly, looks over at the four smartly dressed older women sitting around the solid oak table, laden with magazines, books and a neat green folder in front of each.

Interviewer: Oh. That sounds wonderful.

Deloris: This is Trudy. I am writing the article about, for the women's magazine.

Trudy: I now must find a photograph.

Deloris: Find a photograph! You must have a new one taken.

*Aside:* Deloris asserts this in a playful but serious tone.

Deloris: This is my mother Gloria, as you probably gathered. And this is my aunt Flora and here is my neighbour, Madge from down the road.

*Aside:* The interviewer is passed a green folder by Gloria, Deloris's mother.

*Narrative comment:*

As I opened the folder and looked at the carefully gathered information about the project and facts about the women, I felt slightly uncomfortable with the level of organisation on the part of Deloris but I was eager to be meeting with older black Caribbean women and hoped I had brought with me more than one consent form.

Deloris: These women provide me with the inspiration I need when writing for the magazine.

Interviewer: So. Are you all happy to participate in the research and has Deloris filled you in on all the background?

*Narrative reflection:*

It seemed to me that I would not need to probe too much with my topics and was beginning to feel comfortable about conducting an organised interview where all my research questions would be attended to.

### **Scene 3: Group interview**

Interviewer: What does lifelong learning mean to you?

Madge: It is everything we do.

Deloris: The sorts of things the Women's Resource centre puts are all examples: health and healthy eating and living workshops; a lot of information on diabetes – because that is a real killer in our community. Everything we do, generally, learning about how to stay healthy, by providing good examples from inside the community. At the centre the women have access to computers, photocopying and printing but as you can see I have a computer, photocopier and printer in the lounge.

Gloria: We do have quite a lot of equipment at the centre – scanners, computers, a fax machine but the building is so untidy, dirty and noisy.

Madge: All sorts of women drop in there from all over and we cannot always learn because of the noise.

Flora: And at times it is very crowded.

Gloria: You expect that at that kind of centre.

Deloris: I agree, whilst the centre is near the city centre. It is so much more convenient to get together here.

Trudy: We all drive so it is not a problem coming here to Deloris's place.

Flora: And here you can get a nice cup of tea from a china cup!

Gloria: And not a chipped mug.

Aside: The women are all laughing.

Deloris: It really is not my kind of environment.

Aside: The interviewer re-focuses on lifelong learning.

Interviewer: So about lifelong learning. What do you do? How are you learning?

***Narrative comment:***

Social class and status seemed to be factors in choosing to gather at Deloris's home – particularly in the way certain sentiments were expressed by the women, such as, 'all sorts of women drop in' and 'that kind of centre' and 'not my kind of environment'. The women had found a range of 'legitimate' reasons for gathering at Deloris's home but, underlying these, the major reason appeared to be class. This effectively created an exclusive, self-selected learning group.

**Act 3: Scene 3: 'A touch of class'<sup>20</sup>**

Deloris: I write the Caribbean section for the Women's Resource Centre magazine. I am on the Editorial Board and have to take responsibility for writing the story but the women tell me as much as possible. The centre allows me two pages of text and the other page allocated usually contains short reports, advertisements, events, diary dates and so on. I let Liza – the Australian centre co-ordinator – check it all for accuracy for me because it is always good to do that. Here is my draft of Trudy's story.

Aside: The interviewer is given an A4 typed sheet to read.

Interviewer: Is this the article about coping with diabetes?

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<sup>20</sup> Title from the work of Maguire, M. (1999) 'A touch of class': inclusion and exclusion in initial teacher education, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 3(1).



Trudy: Yes but it's not about me, It's about my father, who has type 2 diabetes. I spoke to Deloris about how I managed and what I have to do to look after him. My father is 80 and he also has glaucoma.

Deloris: It is her story but other women will clearly benefit from reading the article.

Interviewer: So you are writing factual material?

Deloris: I usually do but I did a piece once about healthy Caribbean cooking and somehow I made a negative comment about the dasheen and you know the women had a right go at me for disrespecting a part of our staple diet! I wrote that there were some concerns about the dasheen, that eating a large amount was dangerous because it contained some form of harmful colouring.

Gloria: Colouring! How can something natural contain colouring?

Flora: And how can anyone eat too much of it? It was not that dasheen was growing in such abundant quantities back home.

Deloris: But if there was nothing else to eat!

Madge: All our lives we have been eating dasheen.

Gloria: Yes, we were raised since time and memorial<sup>21</sup>, eating yams and dasheens and green banana and now you are telling us that our food is poisonous!

Deloris: No, rather that there may be some foods eaten in large quantities that may be dangerous to our health.

Gloria: Some might see it as offensive that you should write this.

Trudy: Green bananas contain a great deal of nutrients and we all need iron.

Narrative comment:

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<sup>21</sup>As stated by the participant

The women's speech appeared to me to be deliberately exaggerated as if they were projecting perfect British accents with a touch of class (Maguire, 1999) in their role as educators.

**Act 3: Scene 4: One-to-one interview with Deloris**

Interviewer: So Deloris, tell me about your readership?

Deloris: We have a list of around 160 women – not just black women. There are 180 names but not all of them come to the meetings of course. When we have the big events – like a drama you will be surprised to see how many turn up. We had a Sickle cell evening not too long ago and we invited some special guests from London – the TV host and an ex-boxer came to speak – he proved quite popular actually.

Interviewer: May I ask you again. What does lifelong learning mean to you?

Deloris: It means the right thing to be doing. I mean why should we stop?

Interviewer: And are you enjoying learning outside of an institution?

Aside: The women seem to instinctively understand the Interviewer's question.

Deloris: Immensely!

Interviewer: So what exactly is the nature of this learning that takes place whilst you are volunteering at the centre?

Deloris: In writing for the magazine I have to get it right. Not just listening to the women but checking facts is quite a deep process of learning. When we were having the debates about the dasheen, I did not know that there was so much information available – studies and workshops all over the world. I was constantly finding new information.

Interviewer: Using the internet?

Deloris: Young people today do not know how lucky they are. They hardly have to look far for information. All they have to do is just click on a button. Is it any wonder they get bored and get up to all sorts!

Interviewer: To what extent is your learning impacting on the wider community?

Deloris: It is a two-way process, I write an opinion and I get feedback from the others, some women were not happy with the articles I did on the earthquake relief efforts in Haiti. They felt I spent too much time on it and less time on the hurricane relief efforts following the most recent hurricane in Jamaica.

Interviewer: Were they right?

Deloris: They might have been but I knew less about that and I only put my information together based on facts around me. My view was the women were not all that interested in the Haiti situation, not as much as the Jamaican situation – but it is all learning.

Narrative reflection:

The women in the room spoke about their activities at the Women's Resource centre and were generally very courteous and respectful to each other, even when they disagreed, allowing each other time to provide a contribution to a discussion. Polyhythmic realities were not clearly evident among these social interactions. The women did not interrupt the contributions from each other. They waited their turn and allowed one another to speak. However, when the subject of education and the mention of the lack of qualifications of a senior Caribbean politician were raised, it did not take long to see the nature of polyhythmic realities at play among this group of older, sophisticated African Caribbean women.

### **Act 3: Scene 5: Public life and the image of education**

Aside: As the group interview comes to a close, a West Indian newspaper story becomes the subject of discussion.

Gloria: That man has no qualifications and should never be in government!

All: No qualifications!

Trudy: The man is a jackass!

*Aside:* She shouts in a high pitched voice.

(All laughing)

Gloria: Me hear say he dou even hav school sets!

(More hysterical laughter)

All: No qualifications

*Aside:* The words are repeated by all.

Madge: You tink dis could ah ever happen ina JA!

Interviewer: Excuse me

Flora: No star, him wud hafe run! (And she pointed her right hand with two closed fingers up in the air twice) Bom, Bom! (Shouting)

*Aside:* The interviewer is ignored.

All: Never happen in'a Jamaica.

***Narrative interruption:***

I was taken aback by the switch and found it hard to believe my ears. It was as if the women had found a whole new language and had just revealed it to me. Although I understood the dialect, I felt completely shut out and it was clear they wanted to intentionally exclude me. Curiously, I had never felt excluded to that degree by the language of the older Caribbean women featured in Acts One and Two: more I was a newcomer who could join when she wished, whereas here I was in the audience apart

Interviewer: Which country is this?

Trudy: Pure scandalous, pure carry on.

*Aside:* The Interviewer's question is ignored.

Madge: The man saying to everybody. You don't need education!

Flora: Wat a terrible ting.

Deloris: Him favour Duppy!<sup>22</sup>

*Aside:* Deloris pushes her shoulders back, and clenches her fists in ‘manly fashion’ – still wearing her cream coloured, elegant silk dress.

Deloris: De man is a mockery! We caa stan fi dat!

(All laughing)

*Aside:* There is then a moment of silence as the interviewer gazes at the women. Deloris returns to her regal British accent.

Deloris: But I cannot understand how and why he was put in charge in the first place.

Trudy: It is such an embarrassing situation that I don’t believe it to be true.

Gloria: In politics so much can be invented.

Truly: That is so true!

*Aside:* The interviewer appears baffled but relieved at the return to ‘normality’.

Madge: He must have been qualified – surely he would not have been allowed to go for the position?

Deloris: If he was a woman he would never have gotten a foot in the door!

Gloria: Eugenia Charles I am sure has all sorts of qualifications.

Madge: But he is a senior Minister!

Flora: Anything can happen in politics.

Deloris: You mean polytricks.

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22 Jamaican slang for ghost or spirit.

(All laughing)

Gloria: But the islanders must feel terrible to know that this person is in the role but with no formal academic qualifications!

Interviewer: Is that a fact?

*Aside:* The interviewer is ignored.

Deloris: Can you imagine if the UK appointed a man to a similar position with no formal qualifications?

Trudy: But he is good at his job.

Gloria: That is not the issue.

*Aside:* The interviewer allows the women to continue uninterrupted.

Flora: You know it is wrong and the people have made a terrible mistake which I hope they will not repeat.

Gloria: It is so wrong.

Madge: You have so many more persons with the world of qualification and they are useless at their jobs – what is worse than that? He is good at his job!

Deloris: But why are you sticking up for him!

***Narrative reflection:***

The women were all born in the Caribbean and they all spoke perfect English. But it was now clear to me that at any time, such perfect English accents could quite easily switch to Caribbean patois within an instant. I reflected on the switch in accents and felt it to be the collective strength of the women in sticking to each other in a shared belief that they were not willing to have challenged. They held a view and they wanted time to indulge in social interaction with each other to show their disapproval and their views on meritocracy. I surmised that if they felt that I, as an outsider (the ‘knowledgeable

researcher'), might challenge their contempt of the issue under discussion, they may not have a chance to give the issue the condemnation they felt it warranted. This was also a feature of polyrhythmic reality (the sisterly support and trivial ways in which they addressed serious matters). Reverting to Caribbean patois was, I felt, one sure way of shutting out the Interviewer. Although I acknowledged that the women may be aware that I could speak Caribbean patois, they knew that in my professional role as researcher I would be unlikely to use patois to communicate with them, thus keeping me outside this discussion until they secured their ground.

## **Chapter summary**

### **The heart of the race**

This chapter has reflected the polyrhythmic realities reflected in the aesthetic essence of African cultures and language (Sheared, 1993:5). Such realities open access to perceptions at different levels, allowing for deeper understanding and knowing of others – at the 'heart of the race'. These insights are found embedded in the stories told and in the behaviours, attitudes and actions of the women. Starting from the concept of polyrhythmic realities allowed me to capture the multiple rhythms (Sheared, 1999) flowing through the women's discussions within their various social and cultural learning settings. For example, in my questions around the nature and benefits of learning, the particular ways in which the women held their discussions (openly talking about and telling tales about each other); and the nature of sisterly support sparring which was evident in their conversations (at times encouraging but at other times, critical) offered insights into their gains and ways of engaging in informal learning communities. The polyrhythmic realities reflected in the swift transitions between emotions, from sadness and upset to happiness and hope; the constant interruptions and impatiently talking across each other; and the trivial ways in which they addressed apparently significant issues, similarly displayed important ways that informal learning needed to be constructed to have value for them. The context and social interactions, as much as the focus or subject of the learning that they discussed were clearly embedded in their experiences of what they described as learning. Nevertheless, the subjects that they identified as the focus of

learning were also significant and sources of emotions linked to prior learning, histories and different cultural understandings of Caribbean settings.

### **Black matriarchs and the inadequacies of categorisation**

Identity was an important feature of this chapter and in the first Act, the black women matriarchs were adamant in their desire to be identified as West Indians. In their later years, informal learning seemed to have promoted new confidences, providing the much needed vehicle to be able to openly voice their opinions. There are conflicting conceptions of what it means to be older, black and female in the UK, and the women's stories in this chapter argue the importance of exploring the diverse discourse in this area, particularly critical race theory in the work of Gilborne (2006) and others, which highlights the pressure to focus on 'African Caribbean' as an American conception that may be ultimately harmful and contribute to undermining the black race by not also recognising different experiences of history and migration. The women in my study appeared undaunted, however, by externally recommended labels, and asserted a clear choice in separating African from Caribbean. This choice seemed critical to their symbolic identities. They had already directly experienced what it meant to be labelled as coloured and then black; but now African? Whilst at one level, they appeared accepting of earlier labels, their stories indicate their levels of discomfort with these externally imposed designations. In their later years, they demonstrated a new confidence, drawn from the shared benefits of their shared community learning, providing them with the strengths to assert their deeply felt preferences around their own preferred labels of identity.

The term 'African Caribbean' was a new and unwelcome identity label which the women were unwilling to accept. Their insistence on a self-selected label symbolises other resistances in the nature of their learning, such as unwillingness to compromise on the content of the learning material or particular approaches; and even the challenges I experienced in focus on my questions. The connotation of being inappropriately labelled (African Caribbean), associated with an external world where services often failed to serve their needs appropriately, further signified exclusion of their distinct histories and



therefore – ultimately – their contributions would not be recognised. Being West Indian was of great importance to ‘first generation African Caribbean women’. An earlier assertion by Hall concurs with the sentiments expressed by the women about not wishing to be identified as African:

When I was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s as a child in Kingston, I was surrounded by the signs, music and rhythms of this Africa of the Diaspora, which only existed as a result of a long and discontinuous series of transformations. But, although almost everyone around me was some shade of brown or black (Africa 'speaks'!), I never once heard a single person refer to themselves or to others as, in some way, or as having been at some time in the past, 'African'. (Hall: 231, 1992)

The narrative stories depicted in Act Two created a distinct impression of women who were primarily dependent on social housing, health and social care support, contrasting with the more affluent women depicted in Act Three who displayed more confidence, choice and independence and were clearly leading more comfortable lives. However, all the women represented in this chapter had in common their shared belief in the value of education and learning, and their commitment to community endeavour and to volunteering for the benefit of others.

In Act 1, we observed that even possessing a book was a symbol of education, highlighting its importance. However, that it was carried about unread and that the shame of being unable to read it remained hidden for many years also underlines the damaging effects of being rejected from education or unable to access learning at a young age. Black women who are learning in their later lives are faced with, and come to terms with, many realities. These narratives of women who were learning in community centres reflect on missed opportunities, hopes, aspirations and learning journeys still to come. Their stories also underline the ‘lifelong’ learning nature of their understanding of learning. My interpretation of the women’s behaviour, attitudes to learning and awareness of the benefits of their learning is grounded in my own experience as a second generation African Caribbean woman. However, I also became increasingly aware of how the experiences that they described of being hidden away from the mainstream corridors of

learning, as a result of their history, culture and social status, had contributed to understanding the significance of their learning.

On my first visit to the women in Act 1 (Meads), I was concerned about what seemed to be a rather rude welcome from one of the women but in hindsight, it was to be expected, as it was Black History month and regular reference back to the days of the empire and matters of slavery featured in many of the women's activities. Learning and education, as their interviews expressed, needed to encompass wider aspirations dealing with the present and future as well. As the first two Acts show, poverty and related welfare concerns continue to be a feature of many of the lives of first generation African Caribbean women in the UK but also of their lives prior to arriving in the 1950s and 1960s. As examined in Chapter 3, education, including lifelong learning, has been closely connected with social mobility and economic gain; but my interviews in Acts 1 and 2, whilst bringing to the forefront glimpses of existing tensions and frustrations amongst black youth – their children and grandchildren – also suggest that benefits from learning were primarily focused around personal development. Yet there were also many references that suggested that the women also regarded their learning as making wider connections and bringing about change for particular groups that they were interacting with. The extent to which this was a part of the women's understanding of its purpose will be explored further in subsequent chapters.

I began this chapter by describing the quiet residential settings which formed a backdrop to my initial encounters with older black women learning in the community. Recently, this 'seemingly quiet residential street' to which I refer has been the subject of much public discussion as a result of public disorder, with a recent fatal shooting of a black male in the months that followed my visit. It occurred in the very street where I conducted my interviews. There is much to explore, therefore, about the nature of social responsibility voiced by many of the women and the role that informal learning might play in helping to reduce the fear of crime in particular parts of the UK.

Just prior to undertaking this study, I had conducted an analysis of the challenges that older black women faced in respect of their wider local communities which had given rise to the following reflections on my part:

How can a demoralised and exhausted community find the strength to mobilise and remove itself out of poverty, deal with low academic achievement, tackle gun crime and at the same time cope with the reality of a society that appears only concerned with those who are able to cope? (Etienne, 2007a)

## **Chapter 6: In search of our Carnival spirits<sup>23</sup>**

### *Narrative introduction*

Whilst the previous chapter dealt with informal learning that was taking place outside a dedicated learning environment (McGivney, 1999), this chapter continues focuses on learning which is described by Field (2006:53) as the learning which ‘occupies a middle position between learning that is an incidental by-product of other activities (informal learning) and intentional instructional (formal learning)’. The chapter concerns non-formal learning in the community – the organised learning which takes place largely in local community centres and invariably with individuals completing courses, often with no formal certificates at the end of the process. However, a great deal of benefit is accrued from such learning, not just for the individual but, as suggested in the previous chapter, it may be of benefit to others in the wider community.

This chapter depicts the stories of older black women volunteers who are participating in non-formal learning for their own benefit, yet who strongly believe that they are also learning for those around them. In presenting their stories, I continue the style previously adopted for Chapter 5, continuing the stories of lifelong learning experienced by first generation African Caribbean women.

### ***Act 4: A story of learning for challenge***

Act 4: focuses on the Black Elders Visiting project and draws on the group interview held at the New Community Centre in Lossington,<sup>24</sup> with six older black women.

The characters are (age, island of origin):

Yvonne: (61, St Kitts)

Iona: (72, Jamaica)

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23 An expression frequently used by older Caribbean women to signify a previous carefree life

24 To protect anonymity, pseudonyms are used for centres, towns and for those interviewed.

Dorothy: (73, Jamaica)

Leticia: (60, Guyana)

June: (52, Trinidad)

Mary: (70, St Kitts)

#### **Act 4: Scene 1: The slow regeneration of Lossington**

Narrator: I am standing in the middle of a large open area on the Lossington<sup>25</sup> estate in North West England with a heavy rucksack on my back and I am about to take a moment to examine my notes and prepare for a group interview with the Black Elders' group. I move forward towards an empty wooden bench and as I go to sit down I see the emblem on the bench which reads: 'Lossington Challenge: Working for the Community'. To the right of me an elderly couple sits with both hands proudly gripping onto the tops of their walking sticks whilst staring into the distance. They appear to ignore me but I quietly say 'Good morning' and give them both a broad smile. 'Oh yes it is', says the elderly man without giving me eye contact. I look in front of me at the new-build, low level, light blue painted flats and contrast these to the tall towering greyness of the old blocks surrounding the scene. I then observe the quaint architecture of the desolate city garden ensemble in the centre of my view, a design obviously actively worked on with much enthusiasm once but now abandoned and uninspiring looking.

Apart from another elderly woman visiting the shops on the precinct, the area is deserted and quiet. On a bright sunny morning, the shops look old and drab and I wonder how long before the shiny, new flats will also look the same on this expansive priority housing estate. The silence is broken by the workmen on the top of scaffolding to the side of the tall blocks nearby as they shout down to their colleagues at the tops of their voices.

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25 The actual name of the city is disguised in order to protect the identity of the women in the study.

*Aside:* Loud shouting but inaudible words could be heard in between moments of silences.

After preparing her notes, the interviewer stands up from the Lossington Challenge bench and walks towards the shops and approaches the newly refurbished Lossington tenants' hall – now the Lossington New Vision community centre.

#### **Act 4: Scene 2: Assertiveness at the community centre**

*Narrative comment:*

Standing outside the building, I rang the buzzer for a few minutes without any answer and then slowly pushed the slightly open door to see a bright hall with a sense of newness about it. There was a fresh smell of paint. A pool table stood close to the wall and two stacks of chairs covered in plastic wrapping were located in the middle of the room. I walked cautiously towards the empty reception desk when I heard a loud booming voice coming from behind me 'The centre is closed!' A little startled I answered: 'I have come for a meeting with the black women's group'.

*Aside:* 'The centre is closed!' the voice repeats.

'Lady, I tell you there is no meeting here today,' the voice replied.

'But I have...' the interviewer begins to say.

'Listen, they are not here today, Wednesdays only'. He interrupted me.

'I have a group meeting with them at 10', I said, 'but I am slightly early'.

'Well there's nothing in the book my lady!' he said in a sharp tone.

*Narrative comment:*

As I went to reach for my telephone in my coat pocket, I heard the cheery voices of older Caribbean women giggling as they entered the hall. One voice calls out:

'There she is. Come to interview us'

*Aside:* The interviewer receives a happy greeting from the women and she is then ushered towards a door bearing the sign 'small training room' and the booming male voice can be heard again.

'Listen, you all have to sign in' he admonished, waving a notebook in the air.

*Narrative comment:* The interchange began, already offering me insights into how different roles were asserted at this centre.

Mary: Let us open up the door first, Amos.

Amos: No you must come now. Too much slackness going on round here these days.

Dorothy: We coming just now.

Yvonne: I see you have not yet unpacked these chairs, Amos. This must be done in time for the meeting.

Dorothy: I hope you have put that boiler on already.

Amos: Come on. Come and sign in please. Every time is the same thing, all you go on like you all run the place.

***Narrative reflection:***

This first exchange put in my mind an impulse to begin my questions asking about roles, and once we were installed, I asked:

Please tell me about the roles you carry out in the community?

Mary: I am the treasurer, A New Vision Board member and I help out at St Jude's.

Iona: I come for the course and I make the teas and sandwiches for the meetings.

Yvonne: I am a Board member and I am on the course.

Dorothy: I am the chairperson of the women's group and also a Board member.

Leticia: I am the vice-chair of the women's group.

June: I co-ordinate the visits to the women in the block – the old housing blocks that is.

### **Act 4: Scene 3**

Interviewer: Do you do all this on a voluntary basis?

June: It is all voluntary – our group runs a service for black elders. We call on the elderly during the week but we are really a pressure group because the women in the blocks are isolated and on their own. When we got the grant it nearly all went for the 10 weeks' course.

Dorothy: But we did get paid for our travel expenses and our lunch. But the Board said we had to spend that money just for the course.

Interviewer: Tell me about the course.

Mary: The courses are to help with our communication skills and they are run by Training for Empowerment. We come to the centre for two hours every week for the programme. We don't get to have our group meetings when we are on the course but we see each other more.

June: We're not sure if it will run next year as the money comes from the Challenge under-spend money but the Board want to see more black women taking part.

Iona: We have two more weeks to go.

Yvonne: Our trainer is Tatiana and she's very helpful and very experienced.

Mary: There are words which we don't understand and our teacher is good at explaining things to us and training us.

Dorothy: How can they expect us to agree to anything if we don't even understand what some of the words mean?

Mary: Like Procurement.

June: Procurement.

Yvonne: And 'Virement'.



Leticia: And 'Capital funding'.

Dorothy: Oh we all know that one.

June: But you all only just get to understand 'Underspend!'

(All laugh)

***Act 4: Scene 4***

Interviewer: So you are really learning on the course?

Iona: We have a lot of fun and we learn so much from Tatiana and from each other and I have more confidence since I have been on the course. She put us on camera and we watch ourselves giving performances (laughing). We had just a few of us to start with but now there are many younger women wanting it but there is no room.

Mary: Tatiana is very strict with us, we read the papers aloud and each one read a section so that we understand it. I don't know how we will get on when she goes because we won't do it when she is gone.

Yvonne: But why not? We should be able to.

Dorothy: It is hard for us. We need her to guide us.

June: You know we cannot get her back. The money was only a one-off.

Dorothy: Babygirl, I think we had better learn how to motivate each other. Our problem is we are all too judgemental of each other.

Aside: All the women are laughing

***Narrative reflection:***

I observed how most of the women felt that learning away from the teacher was not easy and questioned their own ability to sustain motivation.

Dorothy: The teacher always asks us to bring the papers from the meetings and we have to account for things and tell her what took place and how we asked our questions and how we felt. But at the end of the day it is up to us, she can only guide us.

Yvonne: She is really worth the money.

Mary: She will get paid the second instalment when she finishes the work.

Iona: The course has really opened us up to many things. We can even feel OK to ask them to put things in bigger print for some of us.

Dorothy: Now when I get my reports I look forward to reading it.

Iona: If there is something we are not happy with we tell them in advance so it can go on the agenda.

Mary: Before they refused to allow us to speak or raise our points. When we were unhappy with the Challenge Walkers and the way they were behaving and roughing up the kids like they were police officers.

*Aside:* When the women refer to 'them' and 'they', I deduce they are referring to other members of the Challenge Board.

Dorothy: But some of us did get very angry.

Yvonne: You, you mean!

Dorothy: But Sister, they did not want to listen and I had to speak my mind.

Leticia: Young people get harassed by the police, from the Community Support Officers and now from the Challenge Walkers.

Iona: We are trying to get the Board to help with equipment for the youth activities so that the young people can gather again. They just staying up all night on the computer and then sleep all day till late!

Narrative reflection:

I now had a possible explanation as to why the local area was so empty that morning.

Mary: What is there for them to do? Look how long it is taking this centre to get set up?

Iona: Back home there was so much fete one after the other.

Leticia: What can they learn from the fetes? And playing pool is not much better.

Interviewer: So, what do you think you have gained from learning on the course?

Dorothy: We can challenge the men now.

(All laughing)

All: Challenge them! Yes!

*Aside:* The women are now speaking all at once.

#### **Act 4: Scene 5**

Interviewer: And what about the benefits for others in the community?

Yvonne: I feel better equipped to serve the community.

Interviewer: And this is as a result of your new skills?

Iona: Everybody just showing off and Dorothy asking some detective questions.

June: She was good, really good.

*Aside:* The women are laughing and speaking all at once whilst confirming June's assertion.

Interviewer: What type of questions were these?

Iona: Well she did her homework and she never let him get away with anything

Interviewer: Him?

Dorothy: Steve Black from the Housing Office of course. That man is so crafty.

Mary: He does not like to spend one penny for the area and it is not even his money.

Interviewer: So what questions did you ask, Dorothy?

Dorothy: About why Martha had to die in that place, alone? And why it took the housing people so long to find her? And about how they had to mash up all the nice furniture she had when people in the community could have well done with tables and chairs. The people are so wicked. Martha had some nice things in her place.

Mary: The furniture is not important now but she should not have to go that way. That is why what we are doing in the group is so very important.

Iona: And we cannot keep going back. We have to move forward.

Interviewer: So tell me more about the learning from the course. How did it help you on an individual level?

Yvonne: It helped with confidence building. Tatiana kept telling us how it is important to gather facts – not just come up there and ask stupid questions. I did not ask questions before because I did not have any facts. Now we all come to the meetings prepared with at least one question to ask.

Dorothy: And you know what? These people afraid of us now!

Mary: They look like they fear us.

*Aside:* The women are laughing, all talking at once and repeating each other's words.

Narrative reflection:

I was curious about the fragments of this story that they had begun to share but decided to let it emerge later.

Iona: They soon kick us off! (Laughing)

Leticia: You know it is Dorothy, Yvonne and Mary who are officially on the Board but they let the rest of us attend as we are from the community and they cannot stop us.

Mary: You know, they don't know who is who.

(All laughing)

Leticia: But we cannot vote.

(All laughing)

#### **Act 4: Scene 6**

Dorothy: Imagine that, when I first come to this country I was just a shy young girl with no education but now every week I am getting plenty papers this high to read!

Mary: And you are writing speeches for the meetings!

Dorothy: And I am enjoying every minute of it.

Leticia: You know that Dorothy is the only one that can get away with a full 3 minutes in a 1 minute slot!

Dorothy: I work hard on these speeches and I rehearse them but you know when you have the speech and you giving the speech and you look around you and you have to pause and pause again, and then take a breath, and then relax yourself before you continue.

(All laughing)

Mary: So why do you have to look around so much – just read your speech woman!

Dorothy: You don't remember, Tatiana tell we must give eye contact!

Leticia: Yes but only for second or two. You cannot keep looking people over.

Iona: And you must not look at people over the top of your glasses! You can give that Mr Chamberlain some bad looks. You must stop that because it is rude.

Dorothy: But the man can look so mash up and untidy. How can the man come

to these meetings looking so bad?

(All laughing)

Interviewer: In what other ways did the course help you?

Mary: It helped us to listen and be ready to respond to what they tell us. Before we were just so relieved to put the question that we didn't bother listen to the reply!

(All laughing)

Mary: But now we fire back!

Aside: All the women are laughing and are repeating the words: 'We fire back!'

Yvonne: Even if Dorothy not getting it right she still fire back!

Leticia: She just challenges everything.

June: Iona's standard line is – 'That is unacceptable!'

(All laugh)

Iona: We don't want these people to think we are foolish – that is what the course is teaching us – to listen, think before speaking and support each other. It is teaching us not to just rush into things – but take a moment to confer with each other. We see them doing it at the Council meetings at the Town Hall.

Leticia: We just have two more sessions left and we have to bring the teacher our feedback, questions and reflections from the meetings.

Interviewer: So the course is teaching you a great deal would you say?

Leticia: Just *so* much but the time just fly by and the first session was not easy because we had to do so much talking. And the reading was hard as we were forced to read the reports.

Dorothy: Some of us just read the minutes and the agenda.

Interviewer: So you can see some interesting progress along the way?

Mary: Yes because we are all learning and improving along the way and Tatiana is good at encouraging us, she makes us feel better about succeeding and feeling good. Like what we are doing is important and worthwhile.

Leticia: I came over as a child and I remember primary school being very much like fun. Back, home they were really strict about education and suddenly here – it's all fun. I realised now that in some subjects, I knew all the answers and was very good at writing, spelling and grammar compared to the other children in class. But at that time I used to get a lot of racist abuse from the other children so I became very quiet and didn't say much for a long time until my English teacher gave me encouraging comments about my essay and that really motivated me to write more and learn more.

#### **Act 4: Scene 7**

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to be learning apart from the skills for effective committee participation?

Iona: How to get more money for what we are doing.

Interviewer: You mean for the work you are doing in the group?

Iona: Yes for our work on the estate.

Mary: We need to know how to apply for grants because we want more women to join us from the community and we need money to produce a newsletter and for women to receive training to take part in things.

Iona: We don't want everyone to just walk all over us. Did you see how that woman from Debden Block got robbed the other day? And she was right there inside her flat, in broad daylight. They know what they are doing – they just watch. We want the surveillance back on that side but they keep saying no money. But every flat in Judith Latymer's block is already covered!

Interviewer: Judith Latymer?

Mary: She is on the Board and also on the Council.

Dorothy: But she is a decent woman and we all want to help each other.

Iona: You change your tune Dorothy. It's like you seem to like everybody nowadays.

(All laughing)

Dorothy: But you know I have a very important role and I am responsible and have to be seen to be respectful.

Narrative reflection:

I wondered whether this was a case of silencing the voices of the rebels through their incorporation. Has the course assisted in marginalizing the women's voices or is there still a balance of challenging voices? I concluded that in the polyrhythmic nature of their social interaction, the women would, at some point will be able to assess the limits and strengths of their role on the challenge board.

#### **Act 4: Scene 8**

Interviewer: Do you take part in any other learning at any other centre?

June: I was doing an access course at the college at one time when my children were younger but I had so much trouble with them that I had to give it up.

Dorothy: And she have girls you know. Not boys.

Iona: These days the girls are just as bad

Yvonne: It is a real struggle when you are on your own with children.

June: I wanted to go to university but left school with nothing really.

Dorothy: Left school!

June: OK I had problems with the other children but I want to study now – I did not want to at that time but now is different.



Mary: You were bad and you expect your children not to be rebels.

Leticia: Don't be hard on her, those days were tough for us.

Narrative reflection:

The older women appear to think that younger women have a better chance to access education but, as some comments above illustrate, many first generation African Caribbean women who arrived as young children faced significant levels of racism in the school system.

Dorothy: But you three children (referring to Yvonne, June and Leticia) don't know what the word tough is – not like us. You all get the chance for a good education and plenty good teachers. Back home, we just get the chance with one teacher who had to teach the whole village!

(All laughing)

Iona: That is not true Dorothy. His wife used to teach us too.

(All laughing)

### **Act: 5: A story of learning for courage**

*Narrative Introduction:*

Act 5, presents the data from the Black Mother's Survival project group interview, held with 7 first generation African Caribbean women at the Hanston Heritage centre

The characters are (age, island of origin):

Rashida: (72, Trinidad)

Selena: (74, Guyana)

Inez: (53 - co-ordinator or chairperson, Barbados)

Barbara:(59, Grenada)

Betty: (62, St Kitts) community volunteer – elders group

Theresa: (75, Trinidad)

Audrey: (56, Nevis)

***Act 5: Scene 1***

*Narrative comment:*

I am walking down a narrow road in Hanston, and look closely at the long row of terraced houses with large bay windows. Halfway down the road, I walk across another narrow road to my left and come to a house on the corner with no curtains but with a variety of modern artwork in a fully decorated window, with a large visible sign which reads: ‘The Hanston Community Arts Project’. In the next door window, and also on the ground floor, is a photograph of the Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie, next to a bright, red, green and gold sign bearing the words ‘Hanston Heritage Centre’.

***Act 5: Scene 2***

Aside: A dreadlocked middle-aged man with glasses, who is holding onto a large number of assorted letters, opens the door to the Hanston Heritage Centre. This gives the interviewer the impression that he has only just arrived at the centre and has been busy opening up mail.

‘Good afternoon’ (spoken in a serious tone).

‘Inez, Betty’ the man shouts out and then states: ‘You must be the lady doing the research’.

*Aside:* The man does not wait for a reply.

He continues: ‘The folks are through there but wait in here’.

*Aside:* The man speaks sternly and firmly to the interviewer as he escorts her to an open plan area, which was clearly once a front room, and living area and is now being used as a training room.

*Narrative comment:*

Near the entrance to the main door I notice a large table with a computer surrounded by faded copies of the 'Voice' newspaper, displaying faces of black youths under a large caption heading which reads: 'Not another drop!' In the middle of the room are some red sofas. with teacups and saucers on a small coffee table and towards the far end of the room, there are a number of computers and a teenage girl wearing headphones occupies one. A male voice instructs me to: 'Take a seat', and he points to the red sofas.

'I will get out of your way shortly'.

*Aside:* After this statement, the man then begins to rummage through papers in a small filing cabinet near the large table, which is packed with folders in green hanging files.

Man: I hope they tell you this is their last meeting here (muttering under his breath).

*Aside:* Before the interviewer has an opportunity to sit down, the cheerful voices of women could be heard in the hallway and the interviewer catches sight of distinctly colourful African Caribbean costumes, as a group of women, one by one, enter the room.

Woman: Hello dear, we are just making some tea, would you like a cup?

*Aside:* The woman asking the question is an older dark-skinned woman, wearing a green African wrap dress.

Another woman: Hello, I am Inez – it is good to see the person I have been talking to over the telephone.

*Aside:* Spoken by a tall, slim woman, wearing a smart bright yellow and royal blue gown. She holds out her hands to the interviewer.

Interviewer (to a third woman): Hello Betty.

*Aside:* the interviewer recognises the dreadlocked Betty from her photograph in the Heritage Centre brochure.

Betty: Hello. Let me introduce you to my sisters.

*Aside:* A woman of Caribbean Indian decent holds out her hands to the interviewer.

‘I am Rashida, good to meet you’ (spoken with a strong Trinidadian accent)

### **Act 5: Scene 3**

*Aside:* The women gather around the interviewer on the sofas in the centre of the room, ignoring the man in the room, responding comfortably to the interviewer's questions. The women are smartly dressed, as if for an occasion and the interviewer wonders if they have dressed especially for the interview.

Interviewer: So, what are your roles here?

Inez: I help with the Caribbean history room upstairs. I do administration, answer the telephone and I am a student on the ICT course.

Selena: I am one of the volunteers for the Black Mother's Survival project and I come here for the ICT Skills classes for women.

Barbara: I help the tutor with the Information, Communications and Technologies course here on Monday afternoons. I gained my qualifications from Hanston College.

*Aside:* The interviewer wonders why Barbara feels the need to explain where her qualifications came from.

Interviewer: Thank you Barbara.

*Aside:* Barbara moves closer to the interviewer and whispers.

Barbara: Amru thinks we are wasting money bringing in Frontline to deliver the training and that we in the community can do it just as well – but they train the council staff and they are real experts.

*Aside:* Barbara looks back at the man who is still in the room. The interviewer hears the muffled words from the openly disgruntled man: 'When are they going to learn.....Eurocentric.....Nonsense'.

Selena: We learn far better from the experts and we are more motivated to learning when we are taught by them

*Aside:* Said loudly.

Betty: And we want to continue the ICT training here because that way Amru would be able to keep running the centre and he could show that good work was going on. But women are always prioritised these days and sometimes I think men have to work harder for things.

Inez: You must be joking!

*Aside:* The women are now talking loudly all at once, in disapproval of Betty's statement.

Narrative comment:

I observed that Betty is quiet and smiling and I suspect she is being provocative. The male worker is not joining in the conversation but he is repeating to himself, the statement: '30 years in the community! 30 years in the community!'

*Aside:* The male worker finally leaves the room.

Inez: That is my husband but we are not getting along at all.

*Aside:* The woman speaks slowly and seriously as she looks at the interviewer as she speaks.

Rashida: The man work hard for true and how you all can disrespect him so?

*Aside:* Inez ignores the question

#### **Act 5: Scene 4**

Selena: Yes the man work very hard for true.

Theresa: Yes, you cannot deny that. It is hard to find s man who can work so hard.

*Aside:* The women ignore the statement and are now debating whether women's projects are given priority and they move back and forth from what appears to be angry confrontations to jovial expressions.

Theresa: The man is a community champion!

Audrey: He has his supporters in the community.

Barbara: But everything is about supporting women right now.

Theresa: But the Heritage Centre is the heart of our community!

Audrey: Whose side are you on?

(All laughing)

Betty: You have to give him credit for all that work with the youths.

Audrey: So who works more hard than Inez?

Barbara: Yes, tell us!

*Aside:* All the women are talking at the same time and the interviewer decides to intervene in order to change the focus of the discussion.

Interviewer: Tell me about the training.

*Aside:* The women are all silent for a moment as they think about their response to the interviewer's question.

Audrey: The training is an information communication course that is teaching us how to improve our typing skills using Word so we are learning to develop our computer skills but the course is also showing us how to use the internet and how to prepare email.

Selena: We are taking the ICT course to help improve our knowledge and skills.

Inez: We are building together the material for the website for our project because we want local women to know more about our work. We have a little genius here – my granddaughter who is helping with our website.

*Aside:* Inez looks behind her at the young woman who is using the computer at the far end of the room.

Audrey: The computer classes helps with networking and keeping us in contact with other black mothers because through email we can stay in touch. Most of us had to stop our training to raise children. Now we get a second chance.

Interviewer: How does the training help you, Theresa?

Theresa: I am 75, no more young children to look after. My great grandchild is big now. I am in good health and have beaten off breast cancer and two muggers and now I have a computer at home and a mobile phone. I am a survivor and I feel a very happy woman!

(All laughing)

Interviewer: And what about you, Rashida?

Rashida: A lot of us need to get skills for interacting with others and the city officials. Before I came here I was going to the library to learn computer skills but they cut back on the library opening times now and the one day I could go the library is now closed. On the other days the place is pack up with young people using the computers. There is a whole library full up with books but all they want to do is gather round the computer.

Selena: They come in straight after school and there is no computer to use and I cannot understand the system to book it and sometimes you have to wait so long and I just get fed up and leave.

Theresa: The library workers are very helpful. Before I had my computer, I would go there and they would sit by the computer with me and give me one-to-one tuition – but you have to book for that. You have to be very patient to do this job but I find all the library workers seem to enjoy their work.

Audrey: But these days after the first hour in the library you have to pay to use the computers.

Interviewer: So it is much more convenient to learn here at the centre?

Rashida: Of course, because we have no problems getting to use the computer.



## **Act 5: Scene 5**

Interviewer: What does lifelong learning mean to you?

Selena: Lifelong – it never stops!

Inez: I have always had a worry about learning, I feel fearful that because I just have the basic qualification from school that I cannot move on because of it. It is like I have the qualification that young children have and for that reason I have never had the confidence to apply for the youth work diploma. My husband has that qualification but he also has ‘O’ levels and all other types of qualifications too. To me lifelong learning is about helping yourself but also about learning together with others.

Theresa: I came to England in 1956 and it cost me \$390 Trinidadian dollars and 60 cents to get here. The journey took 6 weeks. I was 23 and a bit shy but when you are on a big ship with plenty people for that length of time, you learn to mix, that was lifelong learning for me! When I landed, as big as I was, I wanted an education, but there was no money for learning, I had to find work straight away.

Rashida: There was never any money for learning and I missed out on proper education when I was young, that is why we have lifelong learning to be able to do it when we can today. To me you can never feel satisfied without education. You just feel something is missing and you have to strive for it.

Selena: Lifelong learning is having the courage to continue learning at a mature age.

Rashida: It is a second chance to learn and when the council cannot help us we rely on the immediate family or the extended family.

Interviewer: What does lifelong learning mean to you, Barbara?

Barbara: Lifelong learning is the learning that is acquired in a whole lifetime and passed on to others – like anancy stories.

### ***Narrative reflection:***

A number of lifelong learning themes emerged in this scene, including ideas of time, place and how the women understood the concept of learning. Barriers to learning

through life also emerged, including lack of money, inadequate facilities and women's competing priorities, including stopping training to care for children. The value of community organisations in offering second chance opportunities to learn, as also the facilities offered through local libraries, contributed to my reflections on how the women understood the nature of lifelong learning.

### **Act 5: Scene 6**

Interviewer: Tell me about the work of your group.

Audrey: We are a Black Mothers' survival project – we network with other women and we run a support group for mothers who have experience trauma or violence, mostly involving their children. We have not been operating long but our support is already raising the self-esteem of the mothers.

Rashida: We network locally with black mothers experiencing the same thing and we work to give them courage to deal with their lives in, at times, very frightening surrounding.

Barbara: For young people, not learning and being in school is a problem because when you are learning you do not get yourself into trouble.

Theresa: If only the school could keep them in there. That is where the problem lies. The schools are not tough enough with young people and they get involved in crime. The discipline we had back home in Trinidad was a regime and you had to respect that regime.

Selena: My great-grandson nearly got locked up but he was underage and he was doing so well in the school but somehow he just got lost and no longer interested in his school work. There are just not enough mentors to stick with them and come talk to them when they are having problems. Sometimes a mother's love is just not enough.

*Aside:* The question on the work of their group seems to have morphed into what's wrong with schooling, young people and crime.

Betty: But today we experience much worse than prison, young people are dying on the streets and mothers have to carry on.

Inez: We always say that we are lucky we had a girl child and our girl child produced another girl grandchild for us, not saying that we don't know about the girl gangs but, compared to boys, girls are less trouble when it comes to the police and crime.

Audrey: My grandson and his bad friends were in a gang and us as mothers we feel powerless to do anything. We try so hard but we are constantly losing control of things and we need the support of other women as we are mostly on our own.

Inez: We are tired and exhausted and so what else should we do but support each other?

Betty: There are parts of Hanston that has had its fair share of problems and not all the women have support. We are grandmothers, great-grandmothers and mothers losing children in the same way and we have to go on.

Audrey: Some of us get messed up ourselves.

Inez: We have had some really dreadful things happen in our area.

Barbara: You can get very depressed even though there is nothing you can do about it.

***Narrative comment:***

On hearing the women's stories, collective community support in troubled lives is clearly much needed.

**Act 5: Scene 7**

Interviewer: And what type of support is it that you provide?

Barbara: We bring cake and we talk. We put the mothers in touch with experts who can help.

Rashida: And you know I cannot bring myself to get emotional – not when I am supporting the women.

***Narrative reflection:***

It is interesting how Rashida sees her 'professional' role....even though emotions clearly emerge around these issues.

Selena: Sometimes talking is enough. We find out what can be done. We don't put leaflets about. It is just word of mouth.

Rashida: We are just there for giving the women support and we put the women in touch with other women going through the same thing, and sometimes the law centre and the councillors.

Betty: So many of the black mothers affected feel like giving up and don't really know their rights. Many blame themselves for the crimes inflicted by their children on others or for the crimes which are committed on their children.

Selena: And of course it is their fault mostly.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Selena: Sad to say, it is the way these young women raise their boys.

Aside: All the women are now talking all at once. They appear to have taken issue with Salena's statement.

*Narrative comment:*

I observe the women for a few moments speaking at and to each other in their various Caribbean dialects. One woman's voice becomes clear as she asserts loudly:

Inez: Everyone is entitled to their own opinion but we don't always listen to each other. We want to start a blog for grandmothers because most of the mothers these days are children themselves. As grandmothers and great-grandmothers we don't talk with each other enough. We can do a lot more in our community to support each other. We tend to keep ourselves to ourselves and think it is only our family who are experiencing this problem.

Theresa: My great-grandson was incarcerated when he was only 16.

Betty: We are doing different things in the community but the main thing is talking with others. We run the support group for mothers who have been experiencing emotional pain because of crime carried out by their children on others or crime perpetrated on their children by others. When your child commits a crime it is a very personal thing and most mothers feel ashamed and want to keep themselves to themselves. We find grandmothers show a lot more courage and want to come out to give support to the project when they can – when they are not looking after children. Some blame their children, others blame the schools but it is the society – the world we live in today that is to blame.

***Narrative reflection:***

This seemed a very important project and the women tended to understate the significance of their involvement. The women also did not say how they saw society was to blame but implied some connections to their earlier ideas about schooling, skills and employment.

Inez: My husband (and she looks behind her to check that he is not in the room) thinks as women we just give out too much information about our work. We have been looking to get our project funding and it looks like it's coming through now but other projects lost their funding – like his. There is no money to fund the Heritage Centre and he is hopping mad – so we might soon need to find a new venue for our work!

*Aside:* She laughs out loud and stops abruptly; the laugh seems like disappointment.

Interviewer: And how long are you here for? (Remembering the words of the male worker)

Inez: Well I know we don't need to go anywhere for now. This centre will be here for some time but why fund our work and not fund the centre? It does not make sense. There is talk of the women's issues being given priority or maybe because it is small 'one-off' money but we in the community must talk to each other – but we don't. Not even husbands and wives talk.

*Aside:* She utters this last sentence, slowly and quietly.

Betty: That's the trouble with our community.

Audrey: No togetherness!

Theresa: None whatsoever!

Inez: Not even husbands and wives talk!

Betty: You said that already!

(All laughing)

*Aside:* Now the women are talking over each other, repeating and stressing each other's words. The male centre worker comes back into the room from a door at the back of the room and moves to the large desk near the front windows. He appears to want to intervene in the conversation again. However, the women ignore him and carry on with their banter.

***Narrative reflection:***

I asked myself whether loss of funding for community centres and closure of projects meant the end of this type of informal learning as previously experienced by older black women, with an impact on wider developmental projects, such as the ways these women were establishing their community work with local mothers.

**Act 5: Scene 8**

Interviewer: What are the benefits of your learning? And how are you passing on your learning?

Barbara: I have continued to struggle and have had an education but have still taken every short course going because it is about giving and receiving.

Interviewer: Explain that a little more.

Barbara: I believe I have been able to pass my learning on to others by the volunteering work that I have done. Knowing how people best learn and I have been able to manage

to survive the education system. I have not learnt very much through it as a result of my own efforts and struggles within it and against it. But I have definitely been able to share my particular experiences and I feel over the years, others have benefited from it but I want to develop my knowledge and skills further in order for move into higher education.

*Narrative reflection:*

Barbara's statement provoked a great deal of thought, knitting together multiple ideas around barriers, surviving and thriving within learning systems.

Interviewer: So how is your learning on the ICT course benefiting you and how is it helping with your work in the community?

Theresa: The learning is benefiting because we are learning to type and learning to spell and we can communicate more effectively.

*Aside:* This is said as if it was what the interviewer expected to hear.

Selena: And we can communicate with family and friends and send photographs via the net and more women can join us.

*Aside:* At that moment, the doorbell rings loudly.

'He is here' said Inez rushing out to open the front door.

Betty: But he is early.

*Aside:* The women look very excited and anxious and all get up hurriedly and attend to their attire.

*Aside:* A loud male voice is heard coming from the corridor: 'All dressed up and ready?'

Barbara: The photographer from the newspaper is here. We are having a group photograph for our project launch.

*Narrative reflection:*

I had not been made me aware that they were expecting to be photographed and now I understood that this was the chief reason for all the women from the project being present and so culturally dressed.

The ways in which I had learnt what was happening or what was being referred to by different women gradually and in fragments reminded me of Gubrium and Holstein's (2001: xvii) advice that the empirical material here was 'not simply stories, as if they were self-evident texts with plots, themes, points, beginnings, middles, and ends'. Whilst these protocols were present, 'in the production, communication, and appreciation of accounts', my role was to reassemble fragments and make sense with the women of their narratives.

### **Act 6: A story of learning for Caribbean heritage**

*Narrative Introduction:* This Act presents the story of non-formal learning from 8 members of the West Grove Park Carnival Group.

The characters are:

Brenda: (65, Trinidad)

Merlina: (67, Trinidad)

Anne-Marie: (75, Barbados)

Beatrice: (54, St Vincent)

Evonne: (59, Guyana)

Maxine: (55, Trinidad)

Mindy: (76, Trinidad)

Annie: (53, Barbados)



***Act 6: Scene 1: Approaching the Hibiscus Centre***

*Narrative comment:* I am on a gloomy high street looking up at the old gym building above the chicken shop, in between the pound shop and the betting shop. I take the stairs to the first floor.

***Act 6: Scene 2: Inside the Hibiscus Centre***

*Aside:* The scene is bright and cheerful, in stark contrast to the dreary run down image of the High Street.

*Narrative comment:* I enter a space that is ablaze with colours – emerald greens, cadmium reds – and there is a large, bright, multi-coloured mural on the wall. Next to it is a gold certificate with the words: ‘Best Costume winner, 2005’. The room is reminiscent of a modern purpose built warehouse with large flat tables and noisy talkative women with their hands full of coloured cloth as they skilfully sew and weave in tandem. Loud music of a carnival kind is playing in the background.

*Aside:* The words in the Calypso melody echo loudly: ‘Walk and Wine...Walk and Wine<sup>26</sup>...’ The women are lively, happy and laughing together.

***Act 6: Scene 3***

*Aside:* The women introduce themselves to the interviewer and return to their conversation. The interviewer is then addressed by one woman.

Anne Marie: We are not working today but we are gathering to meet with you.

Annie: We just come for a laugh.

Merlina: Just to make commess<sup>27</sup> in the place.

Maxine: When there is plenty work to do (spoken sternly).

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26 Words from the Calypso song of the same name performed by Caribbean artiste Invader

27 A Caribbean expression – meaning noisy, usually disruptive rambling

Mindy: You young people can learn so much (in a serious tone)

Merlina: Keep the bacchanal and spirit of carnival alive (laughing)

Mindy: It is not about liming and having a good time for good time sake.

Evonne: We only have one tradition.

Beatrice: And that is carnival.

Aside: The women are now all laughing.

Annie: We just watch.

***Act 6: Scene 4***

Aside: The group interview begins

Mindy: I am a seamstress. Qualified and experienced.

Aside: Other women are laughing

Annie: There are no more seamstresses Mindy.

Narrative comment:

The more mature women in the group are attempting to portray a serious and important side to the activity of creating carnival costumes. The younger women appear not to be appreciative of the advice of the older women instructors.

Mindy: I am incensed when I hear this (speaking in a strong Trinidadian accent).

Mindy: A Seamstress is a very important role, my mother and her mother and probably her mother before her was a seamstress

Aside: Most of the women are now laughing and one woman speaks in support of Mindy.

Anne Marie: All too right, tell them Mindy (speaking in a high pitched Bajan accent).

*Narrative comment:*

I decided these exchanges, interesting as they were, needed some guiding towards the purpose of my visit and I asked the women about their understandings of lifelong learning.

Interviewer: What do you all understanding by the term lifelong learning?

Merlina: Freedom! Total freedom to learn when you want.

Beatrice: And what you want.

Mindy: No, not what you want.

Brenda: You think I could study for a degree?

Interviewer: Why not?

Merlina: Of course you can.

*Narrative comment:*

The women begin to speak in strong patois all at once with serious overtones where I could hear comments about who can and cannot study for a degree; what funding was necessary for a degree; qualifications needed; how they missed out on education and how things could have been different for them.

### ***Act 6: Scene 5***

*Aside:* The interviewer interrupts the conversations.

Interviewer: And how are you learning in this lovely space?

Annie: I would like to study costume design (ignoring the question)

Annie: At Art School.

Mindy: But what you think you doing now?

Annie: This not at a specialist trade.

Mindy: Specialist trade!

Anne-Marie: Are you kidding me!

Annie: I mean fashion, at a college.

Anne-Marie: Well I hope you put this training to good use.

Mindy: Good luck to you!

Annie: This - what I am doing will help but I want a recognised qualification.

*Aside:* The woman appears not to believe that this informal learning taking place at the centre has any real value.

Brenda: if you want a Hibiscus certificate you know you will get it.

Evonne: I got my certificate last year and it is up on my wall.

*Aside:* One of the older women in the group go on to make the following observation.

Anne-Marie: Some of you want to make the costumes and some of you just want to wear it, jump up in it, you want to win the prizes but you all don't know how lucky you are!

Mindy: Some of you want to catch man in that costume.

*Aside:* All laughing

Brenda: These young women gone to town with the winding, giving our islands a bad reputation.

Annie: They get on worse in Trin'dad.

Beatrice: Me is not from Trinidad.

*Aside:* She is now demonstrating a wine (sensuous dance)

*Aside:* All laughing

Annie: Well in St Vincent too I am sure.

Aside: All laughing

***Act 6: Scene 6***

Interviewer: Would you say you are learning here?

Merlina: Certainly – and the learning is good when you have time on your hands and nothing on your mind.

Annie: Just make sure you have that needle on your mind before you juke me eye out!

(All laughing)

Merlina – Don't worry I know where this needle going. How many years I am sewing like this!

Interviewer: So about learning...

Merlina: The girls are not learning – they just skylarking – they learning about other people's business – sure!

(All laughing)

Brenda: But you can talk Merlina – we hear it all from you.

Mindy: I don't know what is wrong with Anancy<sup>28</sup> stories but no, you want to hear about pure rudeness.

(Laughter)

Interviewer: This centre looks like it serves a purpose?

Brenda: We work on things all year round. We get a grant from the council we have people coming in to show us the new designs and tricks of the trade and now we teaching others our own designs.

***Narrative reflection:***

The women in Act 6, appeared as a group that was both very open to outsiders but, compared to earlier Acts, least able to focus on what they understood by learning except in a few cases. I reflected on what the women were doing at the centre and how they understood their activities. One woman (Mindy) had pointed out that that they (the younger women) could ‘learn so much’ (from the centre). However, it appeared that the majority of the women did not see the Hibiscus Centre as a centre for learning. When asked about learning at the centre, one woman (Mindy) replied by declaring what she would like to learn and another (Annie) referred to learning a specialist trade like fashion, at a college. However one woman (Merlina) said of lifelong learning – that it was ‘total freedom to learn what you want and, unlike most of the others, connected what she was doing at the centre with learning. For most of the women, it appeared that learning was perceived as formal and serious and taking place in a college setting and not as social participation as they were demonstrating in their activities at the Hibiscus Centre.

**Chapter summary**

This chapter reflects three different faces of learning but all with a performance learning thread running through them as the women appear to remember carnival and their oral history back home in the Caribbean. In the three Acts, the women engage in dramatics as they discuss their learning and some dress in Caribbean costume, whilst they engage in incessant laughter, typifying their invariably happy Caribbean carnival spirits. In the first Act (4) a performance style learning face is presented where the women appear to be asking stage-managed questions and delivering their speeches to full effect on the Challenge Board. Here the women are very aware of their audience as one woman states ‘everybody showing off and Dorothy asking some detective questions’. Dorothy herself is flamboyant in her delivery and is aware of her audience as she takes her time to present her carefully prepared contribution. She tells the other women: ‘I work hard on these

speeches'. In Act 5, the women engage in serious discussion but choose to dress in colourful Caribbean costume and present a Caribbean carnival image as they prepare to take a photograph for the local newspaper, which will be available to the wider community. In Acts 4 and 5, the women are directly focused on learning and on helping the wider community with their learning but they are also focused on maximising their learning for wider opportunities for themselves. On the other hand, the women in Act 6 appear not to be altogether focused on learning but on self and amusement. This is in stark contrast to the vast majority of women in the stories so far. All three Acts in the chapter encompass a search for something lost and a woman in Act 6 captures this search with her statement: 'Keep the spirit of carnival alive'.

A number of themes around the purposes of learning emerge from the data in this chapter, which I will go on to discuss in Chapter 8. Such themes include: learning and taking control of our lives; learning whilst tackling isolation in the community.

## Chapter 7: Spreading our wings<sup>29</sup>

### *Narrative introduction*

In Chapter 3, I discussed the conceptual diversity of lifelong learning and its continuous, personal development. This chapter begins by exploring this continuous personal development and further diversity in the learning lives of three first generation African Caribbean women, participating in formal learning in UK colleges. The chapter first introduces the women students who come together in their volunteering roles as community mentors but who are enrolled in formal learning programmes in Lincolnvale City.<sup>30</sup> The chapter tells the women's stories of learning where they are all working to complete a college diploma for a specific purpose. First, there is Vereen (aged 52) seeking to obtain a diploma in order to help 'empower others'; second is Candace (aged 54) who is learning to be able to help 'raise self-esteem in the community'; and third, Eldra (aged 70) who is studying for a diploma in order to 'tackle social injustice'. Thus, just as in previous chapters many of the women learning in informal settings appear to identify their learning as having wider benefits for purposes well beyond their own personal development.

The backdrop to these stories, therefore, is the insights that they offer into the ways in which older black women care for others in the community and seek to share purposeful learning. In such instances, caring roles are varied and carried out not only for immediate and extended family members but also for wider community members. In presenting the first Act, I have detracted from my previously brief personal biographies and have chosen to include details of study and previous occupations of the women participants. In this way, the Act seeks to demonstrate long standing involvement by the women, in caring for others.

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29 Taken from a storyline from Chapter 7, spoken by a woman in the study

30 The actual name of the city is disguised in order to protect the identity of the women in the study.



In the case of the women in this chapter, there is a phase of caring for oneself, which occurs when they are largely free from major caring responsibilities and can begin to broaden their horizons and respond to their own personal development. The women refer to such a time as ‘spreading my wings’ and ‘an opportunity for independence and freedom’. The chapter charts journeys through formal learning in later life, initially by highlighting benefits, with experiences of education in the UK, and then by detailing the joys, dilemmas and trials faced by the eldest member of the group, Eldra, as she reveals her learning journey both in the Caribbean and the UK.

### **Act 7: A story of mentoring for community.**

#### ***Narrative introduction:***

The three women volunteers are all members of the Black Learners and Achievers Project (BLAP) and act as mentors to young pupils who attend local primary and secondary schools and who come to the project for extra Mathematics and English classes. The home of BLAP is a small supplementary teaching classroom located beyond the kitchen of the Lincolnvale Caribbean Community bakery, situated on the edge of the city centre.

The characters are:

Eldra: (70, St Vincent)

Came to the UK in 1959, aged 20

College course: Explorers Diploma for Older Learners

Mode: 16 weeks full-time residential

College: Hillviewdale Further Education College

Vocation: Former carer/ former BME project manager/former local councillor

Vereen: (52, Grenada)

Came to the UK in 1958, aged 2

College course: Teacher training

Mode: Full-time: 3 days a week.

College: Lincolnvale Community College

Vocation: Former library worker/former teaching assistant /former carer

Candace: (54, Jamaica)

Came to the UK in 1959, aged 5

College course: Access to Higher Education

Mode: Part-time: 1 evening a week

College: Highfield Adult Learning College

Vocation: Former community worker/ former short life housing manager

***Narrative comment:***

My group interview with the three women was followed by a one-to-one interview with Eldra, the eldest member of the group.

*Aside:* The group interview is about to begin amidst the aroma of freshly baked hard dough breads, fried dumplings and patties which the researcher observed on display on the warming trays in the kitchen.

***Act 7: Scene 1:***

Baker 1: More carrot juice please, Ms Vilma.

Baker 2: You all, mind the pot on the fire!

*Aside:* It is Saturday morning and the shop is preparing for its Saturday morning customers.

***Act 7: Scene 2: Welcome***

Eldra: (in a loud and authoritative voice) Welcome to the Black Learners Achievers Project.

Interviewer: Hello. I am very pleased to be here.

*Aside:* The dark skinned woman who greeted me is smartly dressed in a knee-length navy dress, worn with a matching tailored overcoat and she wears her hair in short tight, black curls. Later I considered that she looked far younger than her 70 years. In stark contrast, the other two, much younger looking women are casually dressed. One is wearing jeans (Vereen) and the other (Candace) is wearing a long black skirt with a faded tee shirt. Candace has short dreadlocks and Vereen is wearing her pressed hair tied back.

*Aside:* The younger women simultaneously glance at the interviewer from head to toe. The interviewer pretends not to notice.

Interviewer: What a wonderful venue and a good location.

Eldra: The children do not mind coming down here because they know they will get something nice to eat.

Vereen: Something nice to eat. You mean **you** come here to get something nice to eat. The kids don't eat the West Indian food. The only thing I have seen them rushing to get their hands on in here is that bubble gum machine on the counter.

Candace: The young people don't want West Indian food. They only want sweets.

Vereen: And to my knowledge they do not serve chips here.

Eldra: Thank goodness for that (she says, ignoring being corrected).

***Act 7: Scene 3: The mentoring role – group interview with black women mentors***

Interviewer: Tell me about the project.

Candace: It provides supplementary classes in English and Maths

Interviewer: Do you all teach these classes?

Eldra: Very occasionally, I have been much too busy with my course.

Candace: We have all helped in the past when the tutors have been away.

Vereen: Now with our studies we hardly have time for ourselves.

Eldra: I mentor a 12-year-old girl, Tameka, she reminds me so much of myself when I was young (laughs). I have to say, only in image mind. She is so lazy!

Vereen: Still lazy!

Eldra: Oh yes. The fact of the matter is these days young people have so many things to occupy their brains with. Coming to do some hard reading and writing is the last thing on their minds.

Candace: I mentor a 14-year-old girl. Every time we meet it's a real struggle. She is always late. There are times where she just does not show up at all. When she does attend, she is all dolled up with one side of her hair shaved off and those long painted nails of hers (others laugh). She seems to spend the whole of our time together just looking at her nails whilst I talk at her. Her three favourite words to me are: 'Oh'; 'not really' and 'I suppose so!' (all laughing). I never once heard her say 'Yes' or 'No' or even start a conversation. She likes to say 'Oh' to anything I tell her. I could say 'Kadesha, you could be the Woman Scientist of the Year if you put your mind to it' and she would respond 'Oh!' (The women are laughing). And her mother looks just the same, the same nose ring and the same make-up. I cannot understand that style (laughing).

Interviewer: And who do you mentor, Vereen?

Vereen: I mentor a young troublesome boy aged 11. When I first met him he was very sweet and after the four months, he was still very sweet. I could not understand how and why he needed a mentor because he looked like such a good boy. But of course, my impression of his sweetness did not last long. I am told he gets up to all sorts in the school, bullying other kids, shouting his mouth off.

Interviewer: It seems like it has not been working out. Can you think of any reasons why?

*Aside:* The women are silent. All three, have serious looking faces. After a few seconds a number of swift responses follow.

Vereen: Not working out!

*Aside:* She shouts out loud

Vereen: I have you know that the mentor project is a total success. We may have issues and will have our views about certain things but the relationships we have with our mentees are very positive relationships.

Candace: Oh yes, we are doing very well.

Interviewer: I did not mean....

*Aside:* The interviewer is ignored

Eldra: Our sessions with our mentees are very productive.

Vereen: Rashard may be unruly in school but he is never disrespectful of me.

Candace: The year is nearly up and they still come along. I meet with my mentee before the classes.

Interviewer: What I meant was....

*Aside:* The interviewer is interrupted.

Vereen: The scheme is serving a dual purpose. We encourage them. We are like second mothers to them. When the men were doing the mentoring, they would shout at the children, like drill sergeants.

Candace: We respect the children so they in turn respect us.

*Aside:* There is a lull and the interviewer speaks.

Interviewer: You are all amazing and so incredible. I am so impressed with your success whilst you are learning at the same time.

*Aside:* There is a moment silence.

Vereen: Well thank you very much. You worried us for a minute (smiling).

Candace: It's good to know where black sisters are coming from.

*Aside:* The interviewer breaths a sign of relief as she feels reassured that all is not lost.

Eldra: You should know that they are now getting a chance to show off their talents at the Town Hall. They are part of the Culture for Success Forum. My mentee is reciting a poem she wrote herself.

Candace: My Kadesha is part of the dancing troupe.

Vereen: They are making my Rashard play the drums (all laugh). Again!

Interviewer: So what is the incentive...(interrupted)

Candace: What are you getting at? (with a touch of anger)

Vereen: We were chosen to be mentors because we were in education and there are large numbers of black girls at my college but they do not have the years of experience raising children and we feel proud that we were chosen.

Candace: Proud to have been chosen.

*Aside:* The words are repeated.

Eldra: We like what we are doing and the community respects us for what we are doing.

Candace: Are you thinking because we are mature women, you are surprised to hear about such positive relationships with younger people?

*Aside:* There is more obvious anger in this assertion.

Interviewer: No not at all, on the contrary....

Vereen: Education is important.

Candace: You must not question our motives for doing it. What do you mean incentives? We do not receive any payment for what we do. We are volunteers.

Eldra: Money, we don't get money for this!

Vereen: We need to put you right on that.

Interviewer: I meant what are the incentives for the young people?

Vereen: Oh, for the young people.

*Aside:* All women are laughing. The interviewer takes another deep breath and waits for calmness to return.

Candace: We tell the young people that they must not waste their lives but we know that we may not be the best examples of role models as we are in education at our age but after so long we are still in their lives. The black male role models have given up on them.

Vereen: Those young buppies....

Candace: Only wanted to place the experience on their CVs.

Vereen: And then they were off like a shot! (All laughing)

Eldra: They were off after the first meeting!

Vereen: After the first meeting!

Eldra: Vanish!

Vereen: No trace.

Candace: Absolutely no trace!

Eldra: You have to have a heart.....

Vereen: .. to mentor young people.

*Aside:* The three women were speaking fast, loudly, talking over each other and at times, finishing each other's sentences.

Candace: Mentoring later at our age.....

Vereen: Means we are here to stay!

*Aside:* The polyrhythmic realities have come into play.

***Narrative reflection:***

I reflected upon black women, learning and volunteering. Does lifelong learning in fact link to community engagement for older black women? Or is learning now a rather selfish act as the women pursue their separate and individual search for formal and further education? My response to this is no, this is not the case for the women in my study as in this Act where formal learning was being pursued, the women were involved in voluntary work of one form or another. In addition they had a track record of working in the community.

Interviewer: How did you find the mentoring project?

Eldra: It found us actually (smiling). They came looking for us at the college

Candace: I think they found all of us the same way, through the colleges. But they found you, Eldra, from the Council.

***Narrative reflection:***

Up until that point the interview was a difficult one for me. The women were defensive and challenging. The return of polyrhythmic realities – albeit briefly– was a welcomed relief. I felt that the phrasing of my questions may have created anxiety in the women and I made a point of listening carefully to their responses. When Candace said ‘It’s good to know where black sisters are coming from’, it made me think that the women may have prejudged me in some way. I felt that the women needed praise and reassurance for their efforts and when I did comment on my appreciation and respect for the work they were doing, they seemed to be more comfortable and less angry.

**Act 7: Scene 4: Formal learning: for whose benefit?**

Interviewer: Tell me about your college learning. What are you studying?



Eldra: I want to start by telling you about my learning back home.

Interviewer: Can we talk about learning in the UK first? Would you mind?

*Aside:* Vereen looks at Eldra and says:

Vereen: Eldra, Candace and I do not have experiences of learning back home to share as we were very young when we came here – for, still a baby really, so it's best that you reflect on that later. We do not have that long for the interview anyway and you know how you like to go on.

Candace: Not that we don't want to hear but we will just be interfering because you know we would want to stop you.

Eldra: It is a good thing I know you two. And please, do not put the interviewer off.

Vereen: When Eldra talks about her experiences she is thorough so I hope you have enough space on your voice recorder! (Laughs)

Interviewer: So tell me about learning now?

Eldra: I am at Hillviewdale Further Education College studying for an Explorers diploma. My course was recommended to me by my trade union – who are paying my course fees. The area I am studying concerns the levels of retirement pension received by retired West Indian people who go back home to the West Indies to retire. They all worked for the same long years in Britain but the level of pension they each receive is not the same. My tutor is a specialist in these sorts of areas and she has great knowledge of the public services and I am always marvelling at all the great educated people at my college and I do feel rather privileged and in awe of them all. As older students, we were told that we could research anything we wanted to and I had so many things that I wanted to explore but I chose my topic because I really could not understand why things were the way they were in respect to pension entitlements abroad because everyone deserves equal treatment and when you are old and poor in the West Indies, money is everything.

Interviewer: What do you hope to gain from the course?

Eldra: New knowledge, a sense of pride as well as a sense of achievement. I already have plenty of certificates for this and that course which I gained over the years but nothing of real substance so this diploma will be significant to me. I am learning so much and this course is finally going to give me some genuine academic qualifications. At first my project was going to be a study of black people in the trade union movement and fighting for justice in the workplace and I had started writing about Bill Morris and his rise to prominence in the trade union movement and I realised how much I already know about him. And what I really wanted to look at was something which I had very little knowledge about and I could then share that knowledge with other older West Indians and we might take collective action to do something about it.

Interviewer: Wow, that's incredible and a really good reason for doing the course.

Candace: She is so good with words.

Vereen: Politician!

Interviewer: And so after the course, what will you do with your new learning – your college diploma?

Eldra: First, I will breathe a sigh of relief and feel so happy that I have fulfilled a lifelong ambition and then I will be out there and everywhere advising union members and others! I will be a qualified voice for the people!

*Aside:* All laughing.

### **Act 7: Scene 5: Benefits of learning**

Interviewer: And how do you think others would benefit from your learning?

Eldra: The fact of the matter is my union will be benefiting greatly and by that I mean the organisation and all its members. My union has a conference on working and planning for retirement, and I am going to lead a workshop there and discuss my project and I see it as a way of giving information to others; and for some, it will be a way of preparing for

the future. The topic is really relevant to my trade union but I cannot reveal everything of course.

Eldra: I am studying for a diploma because I want to tackle social injustice! But on the Explorers Programme, I am finally spreading my wings and doing something for myself.

Vereen: We can honestly say that being on a college access course allows us with an opportunity for independence and freedom when we can finally spread our wings!

*Aside:* This phrase seems to have a real significance for the women.

Interviewer: What does lifelong learning mean to you, Candace?

Candace: A chance to learn at my convenience. A few years back, there was stigma attached to studying for a degree beyond the age of 40. It was usually just older African men who would study at that late age, with their suit and briefcase. We used to just laugh and see this as very embarrassing but not anymore. We actually respect them now.

Interviewer: What are you learning and why?

Candace: I am learning on the access course because I want to raise self-esteem in the community. There really is not a lot of that in the community and it's as if everyone has lost all hope.

***Narrative comment:***

Both Eldra and Candace have talked about their learning as ways of giving something back before they have said much about what they are gaining in terms of their own development. This seems to highlight how strongly they feel their caring responsibilities for others and younger generations.

Candace (continues): There were a lot of expectations placed on us as young women or young girls and even as young children coming from the Caribbean at the time we came. It was like we had all these opportunities and why have we not got ourselves a string of qualifications because education was free. We may not have a Caribbean accent, some would say our accent was not a barrier but in our household, it was just about a work

ethic and that was all that we saw. Our parents worked long hours. There was no parent, no aunt; no uncle in education. Everyone was working in factories, on the buses, on the trains.

Our mother was working night and day at any old job and so whilst we wanted to do better educationally, we were not capable of doing that much better. But our parents expected so much and other family members expected so much because we came here so young but when my brothers came along, I was the one looking after all of them when my Mum and Dad both went out to work. It was like my younger brothers were my own children, I had to bathe them, feed them and then clean the house, wash the clothes and cook everyone's dinner. It was like I had a full-time job too! How on earth could I have done better in school? I had lost my education.

Interviewer: Indeed.

***Narrative interruption:***

What Candace describes about her lost education and all the expectations being focused on work reminds me briefly of reflections in research. African Caribbean women, according to Carby (1982), 'were encouraged and chose to come to Britain precisely to work. Ideologically they were seen as "naturally" suitable for the lowest paid, most menial jobs'.

Interviewer: You are describing a form of oppression and perhaps...

*Aside:* The interviewer is temporarily interrupted

Candace: I knew of girls who came to the UK at the same age as I did and I would say 1 out of 200 went to university straight after school. Had I not had so much responsibility, who knows, I may have got the good 'A' level grades to be able to go. I just about got a grade 2 CSE in English.

Eldra: Those early education school days were so important.

Vereen: And I think we forget what racism felt like in those days. There was a boy in my primary school who would keep on spitting at me for no reason.

Eldra: For no reason?

Vereen: He used to call me wog.

Eldra: Well you know the reason.

Vereen: Yes but at the time I just felt it was for no reason whatsoever – because I never did him anything.

Candace: Well that's where you went wrong. Do you think anyone at my school could get away with doing that to me?

Vereen: You see that was the difference – all the Jamaican kids were tough and stood up for themselves but we were timid.

Eldra: You see the small island people had a different mentality altogether.

Vereen: You are talking about us as if we are from a different planet.

Candace: How could we have ever got far with our education when we had to cope with racist abuse at that age? So many black children would ignore it and just take the abuse, the intimidation and the violation.

Vereen: We had a bad start at home and a bad time in the schools and this is why I want to get my teachers' training qualification to do something serious out there.

Candace: Good self-esteem is so important and we were never ever given that at home, in the schools, nowhere.

Eldra: You cannot blame your mother or your father because the only jobs some of them could get were the night jobs.

*Narrative reflection:*

I recognised that the women were linking their own experiences of parents absent from educational involvement and with limited expectations about their achievements to ways that they could change things for future generations through their own influence in education.

Candace: Yes, and that is why and how our early education suffered. There was not anyone there to help us with our homework and no one to praise us when we were doing well. How could we have done any better? My Dad always goes on about spending all his money on buying us children a whole volume of Encyclopaedia Britannia's and we turn out to be damn fools.

Vereen: Did he really say that?

Candace: He'd say it all the time.

Vereen: That is so awful.

Candace: And did you know that in one of those encyclopaedias it said that the shape of the black man's brain is far inferior to the white man's brain and that we could never ever be as intelligent as the white man. Yes, those were the books my father wanted me to read from.

Vereen: No wonder you all rebelled.

Candace: There was always war in our house over education. I lost interest and could not be bothered with it for a while.

Interviewer: What was the curriculum like when you were at school and how do you think it helped you?

Vereen: I really enjoyed school when I got to be a teenager. It was the best part of my life for a while. We did Domestic Science, Art, Classical Studies, English Literature and British Constitution. I really enjoyed it all.

Vereen: We learnt about Homer, Odysseus and Oedipus. I really enjoyed school. I did not want to leave.

*Aside:* Candace peers at Vereen disapprovingly.

Candace: I left as soon as I got the chance. They kicked me out for regularly not wearing the uniform.

Vereen: I stayed on but failed my 'A' levels.

Interviewer: And what does lifelong learning mean to you now, Vereen?

Vereen: Lifelong learning is a window of opportunity which we would be a fool not to pass through. After all we have waited so long and the chance comes along at this time. Being on benefits means I don't have to pay for everything because there is no way that I would be able to afford it otherwise.

Interviewer: Vereen, tell me some more about what you are learning and why?

Vereen: I am learning in order to gain a teacher's training diploma so that I can help empower others.

Interviewer: Anything to add, Eldra?

Eldra: Back home, we did not have qualification but if you could read and write you were up another level – well above the ordinary people on the island. As a matter of fact, education and status is highly admired in the West Indies.

Vereen: Everywhere, I think you will find Eldra.

Candace: Status is a big thing in the Caribbean.

Vereen: When I go back to Grenada on holiday, my father does not allow my mother to speak with the workers in the yard and we were not allowed to play together or eat together with the people who worked in our gardens.

Eldra: Some of us were considered the education elite in our village but we did not have a paper qualification between us! (Laugh)

Vereen: Class is such a big issue in the Caribbean.

Eldra: My father died when we were very young and there was a time straight after school when my older sister and I had to go to the farm to collect the yams and my sister would carry a sack of yams on her head whilst I walked behind her. She would always know when the high school boys from the college would be coming round the bend. Like lighting the sack of yams would be off her head and in the ditch. She would then compose herself and stroll along the road. As soon as the boys were out of sight she would pull onto my hands and beckon me over to pick up the yams from the ditch.

Candace: (sigh) That story was for your benefit. We have heard it several times.

*Aside:* Eldra ignores the unfavourable assertion.

Vereen: Eldra, you will have plenty of time to talk about ‘back home’ later.

Candace: But you know we talk about class, but the significance of a good education and educational values and aspirations was always instilled in us from an early age.

Vereen: We know the value of education.

Candace: My mother told me when she was a young adult in the West Indies, the island did not have a Prime Minister but a Governor-General. It was not until she came to England that she heard there was a Prime Minister for her country of birth. The Governor-General was very interested in education for the children and she always said that he was a good man. Because there was no radio in the house, she did not get to see any newspapers, and television did not exist back in her day but she remembers hearing the Governor-General speak on RadioVision in the town and he was saying that education was our saviour and we must all learn to read and write for a better future. Every month when my mother went to the market to sell the ground provisions, she would stand by the RadioVision tree with all the other country people and listen to the Governor-General speaking the ‘Queen’s English’. My mother always said: ‘Education is our Saviour’. That man had a big influence on her.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for all your valuable insights and for your time.

Candace: Vereen and I both have to leave now.



Narrative interruption:

As Vereen and Candace open the door to depart, there is a familiar aroma of fried plantain fritters and the shouts of women still giving orders from the shop front.

*Aside:* Candace looks back at the interviewer.

Candace: Let me get you a drink and a patty. Are you vegetarian? (She smiled).

### **Act 7: Scene 6: Learning, community and the individual: Exploring barriers and benefits**

#### ***Narrative introduction:***

The other two women leave the room and I proceed to conduct a one-to-one interview with Eldra, who was born in St Vincent and came to the UK in 1959 at the age of 20. Unlike many of her peers, she did not marry, nor have any children, which she said ‘was a blessing in disguise’ as she would have had the ‘perfect excuse’ for not achieving her educational goals. She is a governor at a primary school in Lincolnvale; a community mentor to a young person; and, up until very recently, was also a local councillor, having served on the City Council for almost 25 years. As a result of her time on the council, she now holds membership of four local boards concerned with community health, education, social housing and civic relations. Such membership allows her frequent access to meeting rooms at the town hall. Eldra told the researcher that she was very well known and respected in the Lincolnvale community and claimed that she had a good working relationship with the council officers, many of whom she says, believe that she is still a serving city councillor.

#### **Act 7: Scene 7**

Interviewer: So what does lifelong learning mean to you?

Eldra: Lifelong learning means everything to me as without it I would not have been able to catch up on my education and today I am finally closer to getting my hands on that

piece of paper that tells the world that I have a college education and a diploma to prove it. I am 70 years of age and have no educational qualifications to speak of but as a child I was considered to have a very bright future, and other children and the older people in my parish had high hopes for me. Not long after I came to England, I heard that people back home were asking questions about me like: ‘Where is Eldra?’ ‘What is she doing?’ ‘She must be a scientist by now or maybe a lawyer!’

*Aside:* She chuckles

Interviewer: How did you cope with such expectations?

Eldra: I had to put up with it all and had to lay low and keep myself to myself for a good long while (laughs out loud), I did not venture back to St Vincent until a good many years. The folks expected so much of me and before I became a councillor in Lincolnvale, people often used to say how much I looked like a school mistress and I found that highly amusing because, growing up, my grandmother used to call me ‘Mistress Eldra’ – that was her nickname for me as she thought I was a bright child. She was my guiding light, my guardian angel and my first and most influential primary teacher, who taught me so much about life and, most importantly, that good education and good appearance, went hand in hand.

*Narrative comment:*

Eldra responded to my questions in a clear, assertive manner, providing very detailed responses. I could not discern a particular Caribbean accent but Eldra frequently used Caribbean colloquialisms when referring to events that had occurred ‘back home’. However, she pronounced her words carefully, and her manner and style gave me the impression that she was, indeed, very well educated. However, during the interview Eldra revealed that she had no formal educational qualifications and had left school at the age of 13 to care for her sick grandmother, the former village postmistress.

**Act 7: Scene 8: Books are more important than walking hammocks**

Interviewer: Tell me more about your early learning and the influence of your grandmother.

Eldra: If I am honest, I can tell you now that most of my early learning came from my grandmother who raised me from an early age and both her and my mother went to the convent school and all who attended convent school were considered the best educated. Of course you had to be one of the well off and privileged girls on the island to get a place inside that place. My grandmother cared about my education and I know she also cared about the education of the poor children in the village.

*Narrative interruption:*

‘she also cared about the education of the poor’ reminded me of Collins’ (2000) reference to black women caring for the wider community.

Eldra: She and I, we would sit together for hours on the front veranda as she read history to me and on occasions, whilst she was reading, she would pause and we would observe little people in the hills in the distance, walking slowly from a neighbouring village, carrying the sick to the hospital in shining white walking hammocks that glowed in the morning sunshine.

Interviewer: Walking hammocks?

Eldra: You should know that I have given that name to what I witnessed back then. Actually the real name for this display was commonly known as ‘Wavet Garçons’ or ‘Cockroach Boys’ – that’s what the old folks called the procession which was a regular feature of village life back home in the 1930s and early 1940s and it was quite a ritual, only performed by drop out school boys from poorer families. These walking hammocks were made with a large white sheet, provided by the church and which was tied tightly at each end onto long bamboo poles. The sick person was carried for miles to hospital by two and sometimes four boys, depending on how heavy the invalid person was.

Interviewer: The boys would carry out such an important task?

*Aside:* Eldra looks serious

Eldra: These were strong boys who would walk in the hot sun and take it in turns to carry the hammock and they would only stop when one of them got tired. Back home in those days the community supported each other as much as possible because, for most people, there was no money for transport and as payment for their arduous journeys, the boys received one dumpling each and a little piece of salt fish to share between them. The schoolboys who performed these tasks were never ever the brightest in the school and their families could not afford books to help them learn and they were usually looked after by the church. My grandmother gave money to the church and if ever she spotted the walking hammocks on a school morning, she would shake her head in disgust. Before, I started school I used to hear her mutter under her breath words like: ‘Holy Trinity should be ashamed. Instead of giving the children books to learn and gain self-respect, they are providing them with tools for walking the dead. What damnation!’ She would then hold onto me tightly and tell me how relieved she was that we were not living in poverty and that I must make sure I was in school every day so I could get a good education then I would never ever be poor like the ‘Wavet Garçons’.

*Narrative reflection:*

I reflected upon the significance of books. It was clear that Eldra’s grandmother had instilled in her the fact that books were a vital part of learning.

Interviewer: So books were very important to your grandmother?

Eldra: As a matter of fact, not just my grandmother but to everyone back then. When I was growing up, in the British West Indies, you had to have books to learn and the same books were all over the islands and we thought they were only in St Vincent at the time but as we grew into adults we found out that every island in the colonies had the same books. We had to go to Delancey’s in the Boulevard to buy our school books and I knew that everyone in our school had a school book, unless you were very poor but most poor families still found a way to get their children the books because learning was important and the teachers expected everyone of us to have a school book.

Interviewer: What type of books did you learn from?

Eldra: That school books then were called The Royal Crown Readers and the contents gave us invaluable insights into the British Empire, the great men and women of England, like Queen Victoria and Lord Nelson. Written on the back of each our books were the words: British Possession, and as children we found out that in other islands there was a Dutch Possession as well as a French Possession edition. We, in St Vincent, had the British Possession and we were very proud of that fact because it was considered the best by all who possessed one. Each book cost one penny but if Mr Delancey, the shop owner, knew your family well, then each year, you would get the books for free but he only gave one copy of a reader to one family, so most children in the same household shared the readers and passed them on to a younger child. We had no other books to learn from *apart from an exercise book with the times table which we had to learn by heart.*

***Narrative comment:***

I considered the nature of books available to Caribbean children like Eldra at that particular time. As long as it was issued by the colonial education system, however, the contents of the books appeared not to matter.

I also found myself remembering bell hooks' (2000:373) rather different assessment, as Eldra recounted her pride in her school books: 'No history books used in public schools informed us about racial imperialism, as instead, we were given romantic notions of the "new world"'.

Interviewer: When did your grandmother start reading to you?

*Aside:* Eldra takes a few moments to reflect.

Eldra: My grandmother first started reading to me in 1943 when I was four years old. That was the time that my mother went to live in the town with my grandmother's sister as she was recommended for a job in the public records office. My grandmother raised my sister and me until my older sister was old enough to go to the convent school and then moved to live with my mother in town. At one point when we were growing up, my older sister had all the school books and at first I did not have any of my own as I had trouble with her over the sharing of the books. She was not really into education in the

way that I was and she never really took learning seriously, I don't think. But yet still she did not want to share her books with me and if it had not been for my grandmother getting involved and reading to me, I would not have sight of any of the Crown Standard Readers that we were meant to be sharing. Delancey only gave one first and one second Crown Reader to one family and my sister kept the books like it was her own. But my grandmother saw to it that she shared and when she went off to the convent I had access to both readers.

Interviewer: Your grandmother read to you only from these readers?

Eldra: My grandmother always read to me from the standard issue Crown Reader in such a flamboyant fashion as if she was performing on the stage. She had amazing diction and such dramatic hand gestures. She would read to me from my sister's first and second Standard Crown Readers and her beautiful voice was strong and her words would echo loudly as she read to me about the gallant efforts of Sir Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh, Horatio Nelson and the battle of Trafalgar. She read in such poetic style that each time she looked like resting I would flick through the pages quickly to find interesting images of other great men, and kings and queens, ships and battles depicting the history of the Great British Empire. She would share with me all the glories of the Empire and as she read, my grandmother's voice level would rise up high and then low and then rise up again and I thought she had all the time in the world and that she would be reading to me forever.

Interviewer: You seem to remember those days so very well?

*Aside:* Eldra smiles.

Eldra: You see, the thing was as a child I was so excited by her performances that when I became proficient enough to be able to read to her myself, I would use similar hand gestures and stress my words in the same manner in which she had done. But there came a time when I was a lot older – about aged 7 maybe, when my grandmother showed the first signs of having an illness. At that time, she clearly was in a great deal of pain because she suddenly slowed down and started reading in a slow monotone manner and

there she had no hand gestures and she took longer to finish her sentences. I recalled a storm outside, and the part of the book that she was reading from concerned battles across deep tempestuous waters, and I imagined the sounds of clashing ships. The readings had become truly vivid and exciting and I did not want my grandmother to stop as Lord Horatio Nelson I believed had lost an eye or an arm and he was about to make a decisive decision.

***Narrative comment:***

Reading about British history was an important part of the British education system but the history of the colonised was never part of the curriculum for first generation African Caribbean women.

Eldra: I was mesmerised by what I was hearing and I just wanted my grandmother to finish reading, and although I was aware she was making signs for me to fetch her some water, I totally ignored her requests and shouted: ‘Finish reading that part!’ I was fearful of going outside to the yard to battle my way through the rain to the pipe, fearing Obeah and what I could see looked like a hurricane outside.

Interviewer: You have some vivid recollections?

Eldra: I blocked out precisely what my grandmother had said in response to my outburst but recall what my older sister had told me about what she was told was my grandmother’s sharp response to me that day: ‘Mistress Eldra, you had better go fetch water and bring your little black (!) self, right here to read until you drop!’ From that day on, the soothing side to my grandmother’s amazing voice was no more. That day I saw the first sign of her illness and I took over the reading of the Crown Readers.

Interviewer: How did you find that reading role?

Eldra: Now you know something? I did take over the reading and my grandmother come back stronger and about two years later my mother eventually sent for my older sister because she managed to get her a place at the convent school in town. I was not old enough to go there and so I stayed with my grandmother and continued my learning at the

local village school until my grandmother's health deteriorated. After my sister left, my grandmother and I got on really well and she went on to correct me when I pronounced my words incorrectly and ever since her strict tutoring I have always fixated on getting pronunciation right.

***Narrative comment:***

It was clear that Eldra thought she was being read to by her knowledgeable grandmother and she in turn felt that her learning was of a good standard – perhaps better than her peers.

Interviewer: How useful was it? Being able to pronounce words correctly I mean?

Eldra: Well it was useful up to a point and I am still learning and had I stayed in school it may have been exceedingly useful in my adult life.

Interviewer: What do you mean by 'up to a point?'

Eldra: You see the thing was, as I grew up, older members of my extended family would come to me to write their letters to other family members living overseas in places like Guadeloupe, Martinique, Curaçao, Puerto Rico and St Croix. I enjoyed that role – of writing letters – and considered myself a very well respected young lady in the community at that time, after all, I was the one who was entrusted to write all their personal letters, and had insights into their private lives. Although, you need to know that I later went on to believe that this role in the community had a profound influence on the poor progress I made in achieving my educational goals.

Interviewer: What did you mean 'poor progress?'

*Aside:* Eldra speaks slowly and disappointingly.

Eldra: If the truth be known, I came to realise that my folks back home kept me back. They depended and relied on me so much that I feel now that I was there for them and not for myself – I was kept me back. Even though when I was writing the letters, I felt I was important and useful, when I think about it now I could not even spell properly and I was making out to them that I was such a little genius. At times I just convince myself



that I could spell certain words and went about spelling words in my own sweet way and my family knew no different. I spelt particular words my way and it just stayed with me over the years – until it all caught up with me of course! (Laugh) For years I was convinced certain words were spelt correctly – like ‘Dearest’ which I spelt: ‘D E R E S T’ and ‘Beloved’ spelt ‘B E L O V E R E D’ and so many other words which I am just too ashamed to mention now. It took such a long time for me to get out of certain habits but certain words I just did not regularly come across in the books that I was reading at the time. The community gave me dictation but never confidently spelt the words for me.

Interviewer: I understand that.

*Narrative comment:*

Eldra acknowledges that she has been a victim of her own success, relied upon by those who needed her but never having the opportunity to significantly fulfil her potential.

Eldra: Everyone came to me to write their letters and with each letter I composed I got better at producing the next one. My words would just flow on the pages with words like: ‘Your kindness will be remembered with loving fondnesses’ – which they mostly dictated to me. A familiar phrase was: ‘I will always be indebted to you’ and: ‘You are always in our thoughts’. I would then add: ‘We are proud to know that we have someone like you in the family, someone that we hold in such high esteem’ (laugh).

Interviewer: So you were not taking dictation?

Eldra: Well yes and no. My Aunt Theresa, especially, would dictate such wonderful words like poetry: ‘My dearest and most beloved sister Eugenia’ she would say and each time I would know how to start her letters and would race ahead. There were times when I started other people’s letters in the same way. For my uncle I would write: ‘My dearest and most beloved brother Maurice’. If my aunt wanted money she would begin with: ‘My dearest, loving and most generous brother’ (laughing).

Interviewer: Do you think your grandmother reading to you had anything to do with the ‘poor progress’ you mentioned earlier?

Eldra: If you are asking if looking after my grandmother at such a young age also kept me back, then definitely yes, as perhaps I could have had access to wider learning opportunities but I know I received so many benefits because my grandmother was a clever woman and she taught me so much. She used to work at the only post office in the Mountain Valley village and that was a highly important job in those days. Apart from my grandmother, I did not get an opportunity to really mix with people who could help me progress educationally. I didn't think the headmaster at the school was ever keen to see me go further with my education, not in the way that my grandmother did. She always praised me and made me feel good about myself but the headmaster did not have any interest in me and always found fault. So when my grandmother became unwell, I got a chance to really escape school.

Interviewer: And what did you mean earlier when you referred to 'achieving educational goals?'

Eldra: By that I mean possessing a college diploma, a recognised certificate and to feel that I have achieved something academically speaking. Learning is what everyone wants and which person would deny its importance? I blame my own self for not acquiring sufficient education earlier in my life, as I feel I did not do enough to get myself a decent education after my grandmother passed. I was naïve and I thought I knew it all but when I reflect, I realise I had no choice about staying on in school. This couldn't happen today but when I was a young girl, it just seemed the right thing for the family to have me do – look after my grandmother because I was always the one who was there for her. It was like my mother lost interest in me after my grandmother started looking after me but my mother gave my sister a chance for a good education, and for me, achieving a college diploma has always been my goal.

*Narrative comment:*

Despite the barriers she faced in the form of family and community responsibilities, Eldra continues to blame herself for not achieving her particular educational goals.

Interviewer: And what has prevented you from achieving this goal up until now?

Eldra: You should know that I have not quite got my diploma yet – I am still working towards it. In modern times, whilst there are many opportunities to learn in adult life, when you are trying to get a significant education in later life, you feel so embarrassed because you think that people think you wasted your time when you were young, and now it seems like you are just looking for a handout in some way. Education to me is like money, it is valuable, everybody wants it really and I compare it to people in this country who look fit to work but who are taking handouts from the state. It is as if they did something wrong along the way, when they were young they wasted their time and that is the reason why they have to ask for education in adult life. In my younger adult life, I felt a little embarrassed that if I started applying for education people would judge me. I think that I was also probably worried about showing myself up and letting others see how little education I actually had. But when I was a young person in the West Indies I would say I spent my whole childhood helping others and that played a part in me not really seeing the bigger picture. I secretly wanted to become a teacher and somehow felt I was already there, and getting qualified did not even enter into the equation. I did not set myself any personal goals at the time and was too busy caring for others.

Interviewer: You mean caring for your grandmother?

Eldra: No, not just my grandmother – helping other extended family members with all sorts – and this included really basic things like writing letters. When I came to England, all I did was care for others too, and even today, I am still writing letters for former constituents.

*Narrative comment:*

As an older black woman, Eldra's experience of caring 'for others' in the community and supporting those 'less educated' may not be unique but appears widespread. Black women's activism, particularly in the area of education then seems to remain invisible in the 'masculinist discourse of 'race' and social change' (Mirza: 1997a:272).

Interviewer: So today you are still helping others and would you say that your learning is providing you with skills to help others?

Eldra: No, my dear, I have always had those skills but what I learn I am always sharing with others naturally, and in fact whomever I come into contact with. I am constantly doing things for other people such as defending families, fighting library closures and such but up until now I never ventured into a college to get myself educated. I always enjoyed and got a lot from representing people who did not have an education but for all these years when I was helping others, I could not see that at the same time, I could have been helping myself with the things that I really wanted to achieve.

Interviewer: Can I go back to ask you about why you felt that your headmaster did not seem interested in seeing you further your education?

Eldra: Now that is a long story and you have got me started so in order for me to give you a clear picture, I have to go back a long way. We were taught in a school which was just a big open plan space, with no side rooms and children of all ages were taught under the same roof. Sometimes there was just one teacher for the whole class and other times the headmaster would have two other teachers he had trained, who would take classes in other parts of the room. We children could see each other from all parts of the open classroom and sometimes we would hear when one of us was being told off by the headmaster. We had to try to keep really quiet so we could hear the teachers' instructions because if you did not catch the instructions, talked too much or misbehaved, you were bound to receive a lash from the headmaster. We got to do dictation a lot and the headmaster would ask us to spell words like 'contemplation' and we had to write it down. He would then ask us to spell something like 'devastation' and we would also have to write that down in our exercise book. Next he would say: 'Spell emancipation and spell remembrance'. He would make sure that it was always a long word and we were sitting close to each other on the benches but we would not dare look at what the next person was writing down otherwise we would get our name called out or receive a lash from the headmaster if we were close to him.

Interviewer: How did you feel about that?

Eldra: The plain truth was each and every one of us felt each other's shame when one of us was picked on to spell the word out aloud. If you got a word wrong, a minute after

Mountain Valley School ended for that day, the whole village would know already who the foolish one was and who took the shame. I was afraid of school education for a long time and was quite fearful of the headmaster and found it very hard to learn from anyone other than from my grandmother. At least, when my grandmother scolded me, there was no one else to see my embarrassment. I dreaded exam day at the school.

Interviewer: Tell me about exam day?

Eldra: On the day of an exam we children were dressed in our best clothes just as if we were going to church. The boys would have neat haircuts and we girls would have our hair neatly plaited and we would carry our slates and lead pencils to class. Exam day was very important and if you did not pass the exam you went down a class or you stayed in the same class depending on how badly you did. There were some big tall children who had to sit in the same class as the smaller children and sometimes children would be as much as four years older than the rest of their classmates. After the exams, we never had any paper to tell us the results, the headmaster would call our name out loud and everyone could hear each other's fate. On the day the results came out, he would shout out the names of the children who did badly really loudly in a really mean way and this was carried out in front of the whole school. If you heard your name loudly you knew it was going to be bad news! The ones who passed would hear their names read out softly, gently, clear and courteously.

*Aside:* Eldra continues talking without any prompting from the interviewer'

Matilda Grooms! You going back to first grade!

Vee-ron-nee-ca Jules.....you moving up to 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

Moo-reen De...Lancy – you are moving to 5<sup>th</sup> grade!

Ronald Richards! You staying where you are!

Winston Sommerset! You are dropping a grade!

Sandra Thomas! You not moving anywhere!

*Aside:* The interviewer intervenes

Interviewer: How do you remember hearing your name being called out?

Eldra: The names were usually read out in alphabetical order but not always. It was like the headmaster wanted to confuse us on occasions but he was always right and the children never dare cross him. When my name was called out very slowly in the wrong order, I did not hear the tone accurately, as the nerves got the better of me and I was just concentrating on the incorrect pronunciation.

*Aside:* Eldra continues:

‘El-draa Bes-sik’ He said in a slow, clear soft English accent.

‘Bes Wick!’ I shouted back impulsively in order to correct the pronunciation of my mispronounced surname.

The headmaster stared across at me for what seemed like for-ever and then bellowed out: ‘Where is your manners child? You want to stay where you are?’ He demanded, looking down and over his spectacles.

The children were trying to conceal their laughter and some of them were holding both hands over their mouths as they held their heads down.

‘No, Mr Henry’, I remembered saying.

‘No what, child?’ he roared.

‘No, Mr Henry, I want to further my education.’

‘Then you had better hush your mouth and stop your interference!’ he barked, to more muffled sounds of laughter from the children.

*Aside:* Eldra pauses.

Eldra: What a scary system that was then. Can you imagine if they did it that way today? In St Vincent, if you did not pass the exam and if you did not go up a class there would be

big trouble at home – you had to tell your mother and grandmother as soon as you got in because if you did not, everyone else would be telling them. I was frightened that I would not go up a class because I knew what my grandmother would say – ‘You too bright for your own good’. I was expected to pass as I were one of the clever older children that the head teacher would eventually train to teach the younger children.

Interviewer: How did you get on with the headmaster after that?

Eldra: The headmaster continued to mispronounce my surname all the time I remained in his school. I just could not see past that experience and could not learn anything much after that. Even though I felt he was wrong, he would not stand to be corrected by me and I remember this experience to this day but he did eventually move me up to the next level but I never got to find out his decision until a whole week later – in his own sweet time, when he had knocked a little of the wind off of my sails.

***Narrative interruption:***

The negative experiences and humiliation meted out by male teachers has had a major impact on the educational trajectory of the first generation Africa Caribbean women. It has been previously described vividly by Anselma in a Story of reading (Act 1) and also alluded to by Dorothy in a story of Challenge (Act 4).

Eldra: This was very upsetting for my grandmother because whilst she knew I was wrong to answer back to the headmaster, she also knew that she had taught me that a person could pronounce their own name how they wished and that a person should not be told by others how they wished their name to be pronounced. Today I now know that that is the English pronouncing my surname.

Interviewer: Is that so?

Eldra: I have been hearing the ‘proper pronunciation’ for years now but still did not change the way I pronounced it. I never did get a chance to talk to my grandmother about my experiences with pronouncing my surname in England. She passed away when

I was 15 and my aunt and her grandchildren came to live in the house and I found myself looking after them and later on, my sister's children too.

Interviewer: Before your grandmother died were you actually prevented from going to school?

Eldra: When I was 13 my grandmother got sick really bad and I had to leave school to care for her. She got better after six months and she sent me back to school as she did not want me to stay off school for too long – but then she was poorly again. Eventually she did not have any say in the matter because at times she could not always communicate and as I had already had some bad experiences at school, I didn't really want to go back. I was not actually prevented really but there was nothing I was learning at school that I could not learn from her at home even if it was at times she taught me from her sick bed.

Interviewer: So how would you describe the barriers to your learning then?

Eldra: The truth was at a very early age getting learning inside me was a problem and getting clever people around me to teach me was a bigger problem. My grandmother was the only person around me whom I knew was clever and had a lot of time for me when I was young. After she died, my mother felt I was too outspoken and that was the reason why my education suffered. She felt that because I answered back to those in authority, my education suffered greatly but I believe it was the opposite and that it was because I answered back that my education was as good as it was. I have to say that when I was very young I learned fast and I was good at remembering things but in school we read from the Crown Readers, and for us as a generation, that was often seen by some of my generation as 'indoctrination' and my sister in particular referred to it as 'brainwashing'. This could have been seen as a barrier to other learning but as a teenager a lot of the books my sister preferred were books which came from the bigger West Indian islands, like Brer Anancy from Jamaica which was all fiction. I told myself – at least my grandmother was teaching me history.

Interviewer: Did you go back to school after your grandmother passed away?



Eldra: Now I am going to come clean and tell you that when my grandmother died I did not go back to school but stayed in the house looking after my sister's children and just helping others in the village.

*Narrative comment:*

It seems that Eldra may have decided at a very early age, to opt out of education and may have given up on a Caribbean education system as a direct result of her earlier negative experiences.

Interviewer: Did you plan to come to the UK?

Eldra: When I was 18, my godparents who had been living in England for several years contacted me with a view to me coming over to study nursing over in the UK and it was like a scholarship for learning in England. I did not really want to do nursing, I wanted to study law or something similar but, in the end, I did not really care what I would be studying, going to England was such a big opportunity. It was planned for a long time but I was unaware that my godmother had become unwell, hence the delay so it took some time before I eventually arrived in England. They did not have any children of their own and so within a year of my arrival in the UK, I ended up having to care for my godmother full-time and there was no talk of the promised nursing studies.

Interviewer: So much caring for others in your life.

Eldra: Seems like the story of my whole life but not really. I am just about to take off properly!

Interviewer: How important is learning to you?

Eldra: There was no doubt about it, for me education was the greatest passport to a good, honest life! I remember my grandmother telling me that on countless occasions and I believed her. My older sister who got a convent education and got pregnant soon after she finished her studies, felt that education went to my head at a very young age and when we were growing up, she was always teasing me about how I took education far too seriously and that I was getting carried away with it all and no man wanted an educated

woman because he would feel subservient and no woman should allow a man to feel that way. My sister went on to have five children who gave her seven grandchildren and three great-grandchildren and today I am really envious of her.

Interviewer: How would you sum up the things that have prevented you from gaining access to learning in the past?

Eldra: It would be easy for me to say caring for others in my young life as well as caring for others in my adult life but if I was not so driven with wanting to help others I would have probably have got myself a diploma a long time ago. But then again I did not class myself as having had a good education – good enough, but not proper. My sister on the other hand almost completed a good, decent education but it did not take her long to get herself married and having more children one after the other. Had this been me, it would have been a blessing in disguise as I would have had the perfect excuse for not achieving my educational goals but I have no children and no husband, so what excuse do I have?

Interviewer: Did you try to get into education when you first arrived in the UK?

Eldra: I have to declare that when I came to England I just stayed in the house just caring for my godmother and then my godfather and I didn't dare ask about university as that would seem so ungrateful as there was illness to consider and I had a home and was being well looked after myself. I didn't even think about my appearance because I had so much to do in the house and I had lost all my enthusiasm for education at that time. It was as if I was so disappointed with coming to England, the Great Empire that I had learnt so much about, and here it was a dull, lonely, depressing place. I was in a big house with no friends apart from my godparents but after they passed things really changed and I started mixing with people my own age and got stuck into working in the community and I have never looked back since.

Interviewer: And today?

Eldra: It is so different, it is like I was 15 again, free again, but this time I am in education and focused just on myself for a change.

Interviewer: Today, in what ways are you able to help others in the community with the things you are learning?

Eldra: I am not certain but to be quite blunt even though I am no longer a councillor, the community members still come to my door seeking my help and I am still available to do my best for them. I get on very well with the council officers and can call on them at any time. But not now, I am giving them a break because I am at college and studying hard!

Interviewer: Tell me about any regrets about your early learning.

Eldra: On so many occasions I know I was bound to be spelling some words incorrectly but the family and the community trusted me because they knew that I had been raised by the postmistress and that I was considered a smart, mature child (laugh). I received a great deal of praise for my letter writing and at the time I never really felt that I was spelling most people's names blatantly incorrectly. I thought that I was being careful about getting it right and I have to admit that I enjoyed the praise and the status I received for helping out. But I do regret not getting the pronunciation of names right.

Interviewer: How has this impacted on your learning today?

Eldra: As a child I looked at words on paper but I was intrigued with the pronunciation of words and so was very hung up about listening and spelling things correctly. Today getting people's names wrong is something that I am nervous about.

Interviewer: Was that because of the experience with your headmaster?

Eldra: Not just that, there was a fairly recent incident or catastrophe as I like to call it, when I attended our family reunion and I received a rather rude awakening.

*Aside:* Eldra remains silent for a few moments. She looks upwards solemnly.

Interviewer: What was the catastrophe?

*Aside:* Eldra sighs.

Eldra: I was actually quite shaken up when a senior, very well educated male member of the family confronted me in public and I have to admit that I felt humiliated. It all came about when here in the UK we were preparing for our family reunion and my niece asked me for some help with putting the names of the family members up on the chart and I was a great help to my niece as I could clearly remember the names of a large number of family members as a result of writing all those family letters. But of course, the names of the family members were never ever spelt out to me and even if they were, when they were spelt, they did not always sound right to me and so I would spell the names in the way that I thought they ought to have been spelt. Where I was told Theresa, I would spell: T E R E S A – in the same way it was pronounced to me. When I heard Beula, I spelt it: B U L A. It was pointless asking my aunts or uncles as in my view, they would often make a very poor attempt at spelling out the names and there were times when I would deliberately put a flowery spin on a family member's name. And strange as it may sound, some have been known to reply back, using my exact same adapted spelling! In such circumstances, Eugene became U G E N E and Eugenie became U G E A N I E and T A D O should have been Theodore and so when my aunt pronounced Dudley to me I embarrassingly wrote it as D O D L A Y.

Interviewer: How did you know the names were not spelt correctly?

Eldra: It came to a head for me on that fatal day, when the family patriarch, Uncle Dudley arrived at the family reunion – all the way from the U.S.A. having been the first relative to have left St Vincent as a young man, and not only did he arrive to celebrate the family reunion, it was also his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was like a professor in the family, very well respected and a very well-travelled man who despite coming from the States and never having set a foot in England, spoke with a strong British accent.

*Aside:* Eldra shouts out:

Eldra: 'Who is the fool that has put this nonsense family tree together?' I remember him asking loudly and rudely.

*Aside:* She continues:

Eldra: It was in the millennium year and, at the age of 61 - I had all the confidence knocked out of me in one full swoop! So many family members found out that day, that after all these years, I was not as clever as they had thought. I had come to the family reunion in St Vincent, in my Chanel suit, all the way from Great Britain of all places, to hear my Uncle Dudley speaking in the Queen's English and going through a long list of names that I had not spelt correctly!

On that day, I detected no family member of mine making any attempt to conceal their obnoxious laughing!

*Narrative reflection:*

Eldra's responses to all my questions have been clear and detailed. Presented almost like an oral history (Gilbert, 2008: 430) account, she has provided illuminating insights into the education system in the colonised British Caribbean islands at a particular time in their history. Her accounts of her personal lifelong learning journeys have been traumatic and eventful and her journey still continues, as she nears her ultimate goals.

**Act 8: A story of learning for political activism**

**Act 8: Scene 1**

*Narrative introduction:*

The women interviewed are elected members who are serving councillors in London boroughs and who are considering undertaking a diploma in Higher Education: The meeting takes place in a quiet area of the cafeteria in a large community college.

The characters (age, island of origin):

Liz: (53, Dominica)

Joyce: (69, Guyana)

Carole: (60, Jamaica)

Julia: (61, Dominica)

## **Act 8: Scene 2**

*Aside:* The group meeting is being held at St Penn's College in an ethnically diverse part of the city.

Julia: It is convenient that this meeting is held locally.

Interviewer: So you are representing different political parties but you are learning together?

Joyce: Yes, we are from different political parties but we support each other when we are here – at the College.

Interviewer: So you are studying now. Tell me about that.

Liz: I myself did have good happy experiences in the schools system – but the black brothers our age suffered. In the early seventies when my partner was 16, 17, he was being picked up and thrown into prison cells for doing nothing.

Joyce: The same for my husband. Just being in the wrong place at the wrong time and you know it is only recently he has revealed this to me. We have been together for over 25 years and this has just come out before, only just recently.

Carole: That kind of thing marks you for life.

### *Narrative comment:*

The women did not respond to my specific question and chose to divulge other matters. It was at this stage that I considered the story-like qualities to my data and recalled Earthy and Cronin's (2008) observation that as narrative researchers we do not always set out to collect narratives as stories but instead discover the presence of story-like qualities in an interviewee's account during our later analysis of a study. I also reflected that by openly sharing their experiences the women were learning about similarities in their experiences.

Julia: Although I had a good education in North London – I still did not do as well as my parents would have liked me to do.

Joyce: My mother thought I did remarkably well with gaining some ‘O’ level and she thought I would be a doctor with that.

*Aside:* All laughing

Julia: When I first got into politics, I was up and down so much, knocking on people’s doors, attending meetings till midnight sometimes, making the teas, clearing up – my name only got put forward at the last minute. They thought it was a long shot – I would never win – but I did!

*Aside:* The women are all laughing

Liz: And the Party has never been the same since!

*Aside:* Laughter

Joyce: I on the other hand had all what it takes, looks, charm, education, excellent employment record but after 15 years working in the constituency - they have only just taken me on board and recognise what I have to offer!

*Aside:* There is raucous laughter and words such as ‘Only just now’ are being repeated.

Carole: But what education you talking about – A little City and Guilds from that bad reputation college

Joyce: It is still an education.

*Narrative comment:*

As the women got together outside their formal meeting places, in informal gatherings, I was able to observe the polyrhythmic realities as they discussed their learning lives, shedding light on insights into other areas of their lives.

Julia: In politics we get an education because there is so much learning that goes on.

Interviewer: What type of learning?

Julia: Learning to get on with others of different perspectives.

Joyce: Learning to cope when you are being insulted.

Liz: You are thrown in at the deep end in politics.

Julia: Swim or sink.

Carole: You are not chosen for what you can do but if your face fits.

*Aside:* 'If your politics fits' and 'if your face fits'. The women are repeating these words.

Joyce: You don't even have to speak good English to be a councillor in Foresdale Town.

*Aside:* The women are laughing

Liz: You are just a name on the ballot paper – if your party is strong in that ward, then you are a certainty.

Julia: But when you are in there – my word you have to be tough. Stand your ground! Be smart!

Joyce: Otherwise the humiliation you receive can kill you!

*Aside:* She turns to the interviewer

Joyce: No joke.

Carole: It is a real steep learning curb.

Liz: I think this is the fastest learning curve for many of us older black women.

Interviewer: What do you mean? Why?

Liz: Because, you just hit the ground running – everyone wants you to deal with their complaints as a priority, everyone tells you they have an urgent case, you have to learn how to use a mobile phone properly, send fast emails, make proper telephone calls to senior staff at the council – regular!

Joyce: Girl, I have never been so frightened in all my life!



Narrative comment: I am mindful that I now need to focus the interview from the informal learning to the formal learning.

### **Act 8: Scene 3**

Interviewer: And what about the Diploma in Local Government?

Julia: This diploma will provide me with a pathway to higher education – it is a recognised, official, formal certificate, which I know I will be proud of. After all it comes from a university!

Interviewer: What can you tell me about the course?

Liz: It deals with the current state of local government and the future.

Julia: We have people from senior positions in local government coming to talk to us.

Carole: We have to write essay about problems we face in our role – we can pick any area – working with tenants, communicating messages to council and constituents, relating to very senior officers, dealing with legislation and the impact on services.

Joyce: We should be attending college two hours every two weeks for three terms, I live on the Kingsley estate so it's convenient for me. I am ashamed at going back to school at my age really.

Liz: This is not school! This is university!

### ***Narrative reflection:***

It was clear from this Act, that black sisterhood was a most significant factor for the women participants. Despite experiencing, at times, hostile local political environments, they came together to pursue their passion for formal learning in their later lives which would overcome their shame around learning from their earlier years.

## **Act 9: A story of learning for identity**

### **Act 9: Scene 1**

#### **Narrative Introduction**

It is late afternoon, as I approach the Meads Adult Community College in Filton, in the city of Meads to conduct a one to one interview with Elsenia, who works as a community volunteer. I approach the large purpose built building located on the edge of a number of low rise, recently built social housing blocks.

Introducing the character in the study:

Elsenia (61, Dominica)

### **Act 9: Scene 2**

Before entering the newly refurbished community college building, I paused to observe the leaflets posted on the display boards in the widows: 'Skills for life'; 'Fitness and hospitality'; 'Introduction to child minding'; Arts and Crafts'; 'Starting a new career'; 'Counselling introduction'; 'Building employability skills' and then amongst the small list of language courses, my eyes became fixed on the course entitled: 'Creole patois for beginners'.

### **Act 9: Scene 3**

As I sat in the reception area waiting to be collected by the interviewee, I was drawn to a rather loud telephone conversation being conducted by a woman on a mobile phone who was sat in the cafeteria to the far left of the reception area.

### **Act 9: Scene 4**

'She think she can come and make commess here, talk labrish and disrespect the project' the spoken words were familiar to me.

The smartly dressed light skinned, woman sporting a natural afro walked towards me and continued her phone conversation.

*Aside:* The voice is loud and assertive.

‘I know you are not going to go there. Hello, Hello. Excuse me, Excuse me’ she repeated.

*Aside:* As she walked towards the interviewer, she peers at her and continues her conversation.

‘What are you implying?’ she asks, turning her back on the Interviewer and turning around again, motioning her to take a seat where she had previously sat.

*Aside:* The interviewer sits down and the interviewee continues her conversation moving the phone from one ear to the other whilst her silver metallic bracelets jingles together at each hurried turn.

*Narrative comment:*

I wondered about what I was observing and the attitude of the woman I was about to interview. Why was she continuing with her conversation and observing me in that manner? It was as if she was judging me but I in turn was observing her and possibly prejudging her intentions. Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest that observations have a lot to offer the qualitative researcher, and from her telephone conversation I had already recorded interesting reflections about her possible attitude to the project that she was leading. However, Corbin and Strauss also note that the researcher may give incorrect meaning to an interaction without subsequently checking out that meaning with participants (2008:30).

### **Act 9: Scene 5:**

‘Sorry about that, I am Elsenä, You don’t mind if we meet out here do you, the Outreach staff are using the office and the training rooms are all booked out’.

Interviewer: I am grateful for your time.

Elsena: That name? Are you from Dominica or St Lucia?

Interviewer: No, my Mother is St Lucian and my father....

Elsena: Well that makes you St Lucian – Why you have to say your mother is St Lucian!  
You should be proud of your heritage and your identity!

Aside: The interviewer feels confronted and feels the interview is commencing in an uncomfortable manner for the Interviewer

Elsena: Sorry to have to say this but that is the thing about us. We don't seem to be proud of our identity. We like to forget our roots.

Interviewer: I didn't mean to come across that way.

Elsena: You speak patois?

Aside: The interviewer feels confronted again. The woman responds with another question before the interviewer is able to reply.

Elsena: *Sa Ka fet?* Aside: She shouts out at the top of her voice, the familiar St Lucian/Dominican greeting)

Interviewer: No I don't but.....

Elsena: I thought as much.

Interviewer: My parents did not speak patois in the home....

Aside: Elsenia interrupts again and the interviewer is prevented from speaking further.

Elsena: I suppose you going to tell me that they thought it would interfere in your English education! Ha Ha Ha.

Interviewer: You know! (The interviewer attempts to acquiesce)

Aside: The interviewer is now appears amused with herself and is now smiling at the Interviewee.

Elsena: You know why I have to rough you up like that. Don't you? I was a rebel when I was young and I did not see the point of education. I am still a rebel now but for the right reasons.

Interviewer: Of course and you are right.

Elsena: You know you could have learnt it?

Interviewer: Learnt?

Elsena: Patois

Interviewer: I know. Yes I do see it as a missed opportunity.

Elsena: Pecisely!

*Aside:* The interviewer is now beginning to feel concerned and worried about who is actually being interviewed and attempts to gain control of the process.

Interviewer: This is why your project I think is an important one. Tell me about it.

Elsena: You know it's never too late to learn. We have a language which is slowly dying because our parents failed to see its significance, especially those misguided parents who came to build up this big country. Those – like your parents who did not appreciate their roots and culture - those who were ashamed of their heritage.

*Aside:* The interviewer is appearing visibly uncomfortable with the accusation

Interviewer: Misguided perhaps but surely not ashamed.

Elsena: Yes - Ashamed.

*Aside:* This is asserted in a serious tone.

Elsena: My father is a Dominican and my mother was from St Lucia and she would Mamaguisse me all the time to turn me away from speaking patois. But growing up I know it was part of my identity and made sure patois it was part of my vocabulary. It never left me. In fact I cannot understand how so many St Lucian and Dominican

children cannot speak patois and so many others can? It is like there is this big divide. I think those who don't speak it look down their noses at those who do speak it – as if they are better than those who speak the language. Far from it I say!

Interviewer: Well I certainly do not fit into that category. Rather the opposite (the interviewer declares with a sense of loss of control) – I agree it should be promoted and regret not being able to speak it myself.

*Aside:* Elsenä stares at the Interviewer and is now smiling again.

Elsena: Anyway I don't want to offend you. That is not my role. You have come to ask me about lifelong learning.

Interviewer: You know I am really inspired by your work. I think it is an important project. Can I start by asking you what you think of the concept of lifelong learning?

Elsena: Sorry for putting you on the spot but that is just my style (She laughs out loud).

Interviewer: So you are learning and promoting awareness whilst you are delivering this course?

*Aside:* Elsenä pauses and takes a deep breath.

Elsena: I was just a child when I came here and my mum used to say, you have to do well in your education, they have the best schools here in Great Britain and you have to do well. But she did not know what I had to put up with back then. I had a hard job defending myself in that school, but now, I able to defend my community by going back to school! Yes – lifelong learning is good for defending the community. I enjoy learning now – I can see its purpose.

Interviewer: That is very revealing.

***Narrative reflection:***

I wondered why she had presented her story in this way and was it that she wanted to give an explanation as to why she had perhaps prejudged me. I reflected on Earthy and

Cronin's (2008) assertion that a narrative approach not only concerns the story-telling components or characteristics but also the social interactions between interviewer and interviewee.

Elsena; I am doing so much learning now at this college. I get a lot of valuable information from the High Commission and can see the progress that the islands are making to promote patois. You know it is not encouraged 'back home' at all. Not really. In fact in most cases, it is frowned upon and considered a retrograde step. But it is such an important part of our culture. There are some in the Government who would want to get rid of but some want it as part of the curriculum. Over here we have to promote it. We are best placed to promote it because we are supposed to be more educated as we have access to so much more opportunities in the community to learn.

Interviewer: But this is a voluntary initiative?

*Aside:* She hands the interviewer a leaflet entitled 'St Lucian creole'.

Elsena: Some people think it is not a 'proper language' and that it is not written down but look. This is an example of how it is being developed and promoted.

Interviewer: What types of people come to your course?

Elsena: Well I am trying to promote it in the community. The older women who come here to help me I don't think are all that serious. It's like they are coming her just to socialise. I still have to get them to believe in the project. It is not easy when their parents have this negative view that the language is inferior. In this area there is a large West Indian community and of course it is the area with the most Dominicans and St Lucians. I am looking at learning for the younger generation but there is a lot of work to do.

### ***Narrative reflection:***

At the end of the interview, I was relaxed and comfortable and concluded that Elsenas apparent rudeness was as a result of a combination of frustration and anticipation. On the one hand, it was clear that she had a passion for her project but on the other hand she had

doubts about the commitment of the other women in helping her bring it to fruition (I recalled her opening statement via the mobile phone conversation (*She think she can come and make commess here, talk labrish and disrespect the project*). This implied that there may be challenges to the way in which the older women worked together to achieve their immediate learning goals.

Elsena was eager to share with me the uniqueness of the project as a lifelong learning initiative but was mindful that the women were not taking it seriously.

### **Overall narrative reflection on the Acts in the chapter:**

This chapter demonstrated learning in ‘womanist’ ways as a source of personal and collective inspiration for lifelong learners and a source of strength in their later lives. The three Acts depicted varied stories of learning: informal and formal, with women learning from community-based settings and experiences and through specific programmes. Critical themes, such as humiliation, shame, poverty and frustration recurred from the women’s stories, relating both to past experiences ‘back home’ and earlier years in Britain. The stories revealed barriers to learning, struggles and conflicting demands in their lives but also often reflected memories of happier times, of hopes and aspirations. The Acts also illustrated the women’s positive experiences of recent learning, allowing some of them the freedom to ‘spread their wings’ by pursuing their learning aspirations from informal to non-formal and formal settings. Such aspirations could often focus on tackling a particular learning challenge bringing satisfaction, elation and contentment. It could also link to that their learning could help others in their communities and in Act 7, especially, participating in learning went alongside building social capital, facilitated by initiatives such as community teaching and community mentoring networks, which the women saw as helping to improve the quality of life for younger generations. In many areas, they expressed a bond with all of the black community’s children (Collins, 2000).



## **Overall narrative conclusion**

In these three preceding chapters, the 9 Acts represent the women's recollections of informal learning, and further illustrations of informal learning are captured in the dramatization of group and individual interviews. In this contemporary narrative inquiry, I have developed a particular narrative approach to interpret and present my research, as described in Chapter 4. I acknowledge that this raises complex issues (Hertz, 1997) about 'voice', representation and interpretive authority but have argued this position from my interconnectedness with the women as a result of my gender, ethnic heritage and social disposition. In the way presented, the Acts in the study explain, seek to entertain (Earthy and Cronin, 2008), inform, defend, confirm and challenge (Chase, 2008:65); and whilst the chapters represent a sample of the voices among over 100 women interviewed, I questioned how well this would reflect the experiences of all the women taking part in the study. I assumed that the women were representative of their cultural group (Lieblich et al, 1998) and that they were interested in learning (as my research publicity had invited). However, I specifically asked myself 'who is truly represented?' and how credible were my respondents? I also questioned, 'which particular kinds of research informants are best suited to provide useful accounts' (Kvale, 1996)?

And what of myself as a collaborative researcher, re-representing the views of the women? Goffman (1959) advises us that narratives themselves may be easily manipulated and I therefore needed to reflect on the nature of collaboration and ask whose story is being told and who owns the overall story? The Acts presented the women's challenges about such issues as their own ethnic identity demonstrated resistance to conformity and labels which I or any other 'outside' representative might import, thus their own version had to be an essential component when presenting their stories. Here I noted Gubrium and Hostein's (2009) observations that: listeners 'respond to a speaker's story with diverse embellishments of their own, which in turn give accounts distinctly experiential and emotional resonance' (2009:81). I attended to such concerns by introducing narrative interruptions, comments and reflections interspersed in the women's accounts, aiming to make my own role more transparent, and also noted Chase's recognition that 'in addition to describing what happened, narratives also express

emotions, thoughts, and interpretations (2008:65)'. While acknowledging that: 'if stories are actively composed, storytelling is staged – it is animated and transpires somewhere in relation to some audience, for some purpose' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009:81), as a contemporary narrative researcher I also had a responsibility to interpret the women's narratives responsibly.

As a black feminist researcher my approach to contemporary narrative inquiry has acknowledged that second-wave feminists 'poured new life into the study of personal narratives' (Chase, 2008:58), making space for me to adopt a similar approach to my own research, and ensuring that women are 'subjects' rather than 'objects' of the research (Chase: 2008:62). Whilst men may be 'distant others', the lives of black women are at the forefront – both taking part and determining the outcomes.

I concluded that alongside the uniqueness of individual experiences, there were also ranges of similarities or commonalities that could be observed from the stories presented in these chapters, and the chapters, which follow, seek to draw out some of these key themes. Chase's (2008) three voices of narrative strategies: *Authoritative*, *supportive* and *interactive* assisted in developing these, alongside other strategies of narrative analysis described in Chapter 4.

By reproducing the women's statements verbatim, I allowed room for the reader's interpretation (Riessmann, 2002). However, through using narrated Acts, my 'supportive voice' was also evident, foregrounding the women's voices but maintaining the researcher's respectful distance. However, my 'interactive voice' was clearly apparent as I listened to the women and intervened throughout the Acts. In such circumstances I attended to and examined the women's social locations and the others' they came into contact with whilst telling their stories. I listened to their personal experiences, fears and hopes and I assigned roles within the Acts which shaped the listener's appreciation of the stories told. Using my 'authoritative voice' I acknowledged that in selecting material and inserting various forms of narrative comments I was already building meanings and understanding of the women's stories for a wider audience. Despite aspects of collaboration in the research process, at this stage of the research, in constructing

meanings, my interests differed from those of the women. I was effectively now distancing myself from the women where I had closely resonated with their voices and emotions throughout the interviews. I will now turn to some of the key themes drawn from the narratives, which respond to my original research questions.

## Chapter 8: Research findings, analysis and discussion

### Inside matriarchal learning hubs: Extrapolating black feminist voices

#### *Introduction*

*Through attending to the commonplaces, narrative inquirers are able to study the complexity of the relational composition of people's lived experiences both inside and outside of an inquiry and, as well, to imagine the future possibilities of these lives* (Clandinin and Huber, 2010:29)

This chapter presents my research findings, analysis and discussion from the stories of learning told by first generation African Caribbean women. The chapter considers the ways in which the stories are told and the nature of stories told in order to decipher the benefits for the women and the wider community around them. In carrying out my analysis, I have relied heavily on Sheared's (1999) approach to giving (and allowing) voice to those excluded, as well as Clandinin and Huber's (2010) approach to conducting contemporary narrative analysis in three commonplaces of narrative inquiry, namely: *temporality, sociality and place*. In further interpreting the findings in this chapter I have drawn out themes arising from the women's stories; while representing some common themes these relate closely to the stories, consistent with narrative analysis of this kind (Clandinin and Murphy, 2007).

In addition, I consider the collaborative nature of narrative analysis, giving close attention to Chase's (2005) advice, in treating the women's interviews as narratives, endeavouring to accurately represent their voices in stories of learning. Throughout I am acutely aware of my own voice (Collins, 2000, Barribeau, 2007) in the re-telling of these stories. While acknowledging all these perspectives, I aim to offer insights into contemporary theoretical understandings of the nature of and benefits of lifelong learning for first generation African Caribbean women. In this analysis, the chapter interrogates the stories contained in Acts 1-9: stories of *reading, conversation, writing, challenge, courage, heritage, mentoring, political activism and identity*, emerging inside matriarchal learning hubs, where humiliation, shame, sadness, anger and laughter are all exposed in the

discourse and provide a synthesis of polyrhythmic realities (Sheared, 1999) in the learning lives of these women.

### **Past, present and future learning experiences and opportunities**

Reflecting on Clandinin and Huber's *temporality*, the first common place of narrative analysis, the women drifted between their past and present lives and future expectations in telling their stories. As Clandinin and Huber (2010:87) express it:

Because narrative inquirers attend to individuals' lives as they are composed over time, in relation with people and situations, in a particular place or places, the focus remains on lives as lived and told throughout the inquiry.

In this way, perceptions of past events and learning experiences were viewed and narrated through the lenses of the present to draw out and construct meanings.

### ***The past: reflexivity and learning***

In '*A story of reading*' (Act 1), Anselma, the main character engages with the past and eventually describes how she was able to acquire the skills to read with the support of a community project. In telling her story, she painfully reflects on her early learning experiences 'back home' shifting between past, present and future with little regard to chronology.

Anselma referred to her treasured book (Act 1) which she brought, '*to England with me and I have kept it ever since*'; *a book, which, 'was really of no use to me back then' but which she 'always knew' she 'would be able to read it one day'*. She also tells the story of the teacher 'back home' who humiliated her in front of her class because, '*He already did know that I could not read. All the other children were laughing at me*'. There is both ambiguity and a curious separation here between Anselma's shame at not learning, which she carries with her through many years as a shield against learning, before finally learning to read, and the book that she carries with symbolic pride, even before she could read.

In chapter three, I refer to the deficit model of lifelong learning where inadequacies in achievements are inappropriately blamed on individual failures rather than on economic and social inequalities or institutional failures, and Anselma demonstrates how this blame can be internalised and become a barrier to learning for a long period. Anselma appears to blame herself for past failure in her education through her inability to read, and these early childhood experiences continued to present barriers through lack of confidence, as she attempted to learn through her later years.

Referring again to the treasured book, with a certain ambiguity in terms of temporality, she states, *'This was really and truly the start of my learning'*. This book acted as a symbol for her motivation to return to learning later in life, a banner to remind her of her aspiration, eventually allowing past failures and ambitions to coalesce into present achievements. Anselma also identifies the Staying for Now project as enabling her to *'feel very good about having this opportunity to express myself how I want to and not to feel shy about it'*, quelling past shame about being unable to address or admit openly to her lack of reading ability.

Throughout the women's learning stories, a strong association with books, the family and the Caribbean emerged, highlighting the importance of shared histories, experiences and symbols in subsequent learning settings. In Act 1, Anselma, is described in a photograph, wearing *'a white dress'* with *'one open hand neatly positioned on an open book'*, illustrating its symbolic significance despite its lack of utility for her otherwise, at that time. Yet while pride in books and literacy is clearly recognized in all the women's stories, there is also ambiguity. Even though there are diverse experiences of early education recounted, often depending on when the women came to Britain, they also seem to acknowledge a shared history of falsehoods. Books were prized and their possession was literally an entry ticket to schooling; but they also denote false promises about Britain and its relationships with the Caribbean islands.

For example, in Act 7, Candace contemptuously comments on the unfavourable books made available to her by her father: *'Those were the books my father wanted me to read from'*: books which promoted the grandeurs of Britain that later turned out to be myths.

Similarly, Eldra reflects on the limited availability and narrow range of books ‘back home’: *‘When I was growing up, in the British West Indies, you had to have books to learn and the same books were all over the islands’*. Books then suggest dichotomous meanings: they both represent education with its associated aspirations and status, and in parallel, its rationing and otherness, played out in barriers to learning, social mobility and social exclusion for those of African Caribbean origin.

Despite many of the women acknowledging the narrow lenses attached to this early education in terms of learning about the world, the signifiers for their identities also reflect those early roots. Whilst participating in various cultural activities, the women demonstrate high levels of reflexivity and for example, in ‘Images of liming on the Frontline’ (a Black History Month project), they reflect on past experiences and with new- found confidence, assert their identity and cultural roots as ‘West Indians’. Similarly, in scene 3, the women together repeatedly declare: *‘We are not Africans’*. This type of group unity illustrated in labelling and assertion of identity seems to have played a large part in strengthening ties between the women and supporting and building their learning. Other activities described, such as the Great British invasion project show how they bonded with others through sharing their experiences of arrival in the UK.

In a ‘Story of Conversation’ (Act 2), there are again two parallel stories: the first is of Shirley, a *dogla* who projects her knowledge of ‘Crownlands’ and introduces her evidence and perceptions of slavery. She had prepared a video recording to share her knowledge with others. The younger woman, Jonetta learns for the first time that her mother (Shirley) had lived in Crownlands and would have experienced much hardship. The second story features Minnie, who according to the other women has sacrificed her education for her children. Her son is at the centre of the plotline. In many cases, reflecting back and sharing failures were necessary for learning to occur but in Shirley’s case, she was careful about what she revealed about her history: ‘We talk about our history – we go way back and we talk of now’. Later, her daughter, Jonetta learnt, unexpectedly, another side to her mother’s ‘history’. Shirley seemed to say that the past had a way of catching up with what it means in the present – we only understand the past properly by sharing its significance in the present. However, whilst she stressed ‘we go

way back' she was selective about what she revealed about her past (how she grew up in what her peers considered extreme poverty). She had not discussed this with her daughter Jonetta, who was only just finding this out. For Jonetta, this was quite a revelation and she tried to make sense of her Mother's reasons for not sharing this with her before.

***The present: exploring self, identity and community***

In the second commonplace of narrative inquiry I address *sociality* and analyse the relationship between the women participants, and between myself and the women. I previously discussed the role of the black Caribbean mother (Chapter 2) in the maintenance of cultural and kinship connections because as black women, our role in the community and therefore our collective potential is strong. This led me to consider my ties with the women, how they spoke with me, included and excluded me; and how they defined their identities and personal positions with each other and with me. This involved: feelings, hopes and desires about learning and the inferences offered around these in their communicative narratives about their present social, cultural and institutional conditions.

As identified in the previous section, the women were resolute in asserting their cultural identity: '*We are West Indians!*' (Pamela, Act 1), in contrast to the accepted discourse reflecting African roots. In my narrative comments I have recognised my own collaboration with the women's narratives and language as a part of pursuing and maintaining cultural kinship. My own relationship and close connections with the women were obvious to them, in my understanding of the various dialects and my ability to easily distinguish between their voices. As I note (Act 1, scene 1): 'I could detect the variations in the West Indian dialects', and in my own narrative reflections I spontaneously refer to the women as 'West Indians'. I comment on 'the loud screams and laughter of West Indian women' and realize that I too, seemed to be most comfortable with expressing this identity. I also reflected that: 'I myself had never thought deeply of my mother's father's generation'.

The women appeared interested in my own cultural heritage, with Cindy (Act 2) asking, '*Which part in Dominica your Mother come from?*' Later when I found myself being



tested on my own views and was able to confirm ways that I appreciated their community roles, Candace (Act 6) asserted: *'It's good to know where black sisters are coming from.'*

There were more than a few occasions when I felt challenged as an outsider and implicitly placed under scrutiny until a group of women would allow me to be included again or revert to narratives related to my questions. For example, in Act 3, the women collectively excluded me from their discussions, confirming my position as an outsider. Here the women used a display of comfort in their 'insider' cultural discourse to relax, to feel safe, to promote their identity and to exclude 'others', demonstrating to me that I was ultimately an outsider. I noted in narrative reflections that: 'It was as if the women had found a whole new language and had just revealed it to me. I felt completely shut out and it was clear they wanted to exclude me'.

This kind of balancing between their and my 'here and now' was one way in which the women addressed their *present* selves. There were others, such as constant shifts between standard language and dialect. For example, in Act 4, Dorothy declares:

*Imagine that, when I first come to this country I was just a shy young girl with no education but now every week I am getting plenty papers this high to read!*

In another example, Deloris (Act 3) referred to how she is accessing learning today: *'I did not know that there was so much information available - studies and workshops all over the world. I was constantly finding new information.'*

In Act 5, Rashida comments in a similar vein on the trends she witnessed among young people learning currently: *'There is a whole library full up with books but all they want to do is gather round the computer.'* This seemed to suggest some sadness about the decline or loss of past learning approaches which other older women shared, again a common understanding in their learning experiences. Yet despite this comment, many of the women like Deloris were also very positive about their wider access to information once they could navigate computers. Wider access to information also had its negative sides, as Betty commented:

*'But today we experience much worse than prison, young people are dying on the streets and Mothers have to carry on'* (Act 5), again highlighting some shared experiences, including loss and grief among women and mothers.

Again, shifting a sense of self across different time frames, the women identified future hopes linked both with past aspirations and current or recent achievements, importantly involving other women. For example, Anselma, the woman in the photograph discussed in the group in Act 1, looks into the future and states: *'I feel a sense of purpose when I am with the other women'*. She goes on to comment on her feelings, hopes and desires, and ways that the group experiences have helped overcome learning barriers and led to achievements:

*I know that life in this country was hard at first for all of us and in some ways it is still hard but we have stuck together and have shared many things together and it's nice that we can really do rewarding things now (Anselma, Act 1).*

In Act 7, Eldra who declares she is, *'just about to take off properly!'* looks ahead, to her life after graduating and in particular, emphasizes the ways that she will be able to use her newfound knowledge and skills for others, explaining: *'Then I will be out there and everywhere advising union members and others! I will be a qualified voice for the people!'*

Like Eldra, many of the women express their current learning and future or anticipated achievements positively, yet these invariably reflect sociality: how the women see themselves as connected to other women and other groups within what they regard as their communities. In Act 7 concerning learning for creative writing, Valdine talks about the group's aspirations *'to go into publishing. Set up a company with all our material,* which Zelma confirms as *'our dream'*. In Act 5, Barbara highlights the focus of learning projects on *'supporting women right now'* which she identifies concurrently as positive for their group but also a cause of friction among other community centre participants.

Leticia (Act 4) also highlighted more significant concerns for those around them, in particular for young people, again suggesting tensions between different community

projects around approaches to working together. As she stressed, *'Young people get harassed by the police, from the community support officers and now from the Challenge Workers'*. Many of these comments assume other women's agreement with the speaker's assessment but this is not always the case, as some of the more heated debates with women interrupting each other illustrate. However, this also displays ways in which they expect to work out problems and solutions together, not through suppressing differences but by confronting them.

In wanting to utilise their learning or achievements to help others in the wider community, Dorothy (Act 4) explains how she aims to develop her skills for the benefit of others, suggesting a social justice model approach to lifelong learning, (Doukas, 2002; Jackson, 2011). In Act 7, similarly, Vereen describes how she is, *'learning in order to gain a teacher's training diploma so that I can help empower others'*.

As Chapter 2 highlighted, basic education and qualifications are often identified as, a pre-requisite to acquiring the knowledge for personal development, social and professional enhancement and to become an active participant in society and the economy. This may also hold true to promote social justice; many of the women did not feel they would be listened to without the status gained from a certain level of qualifications. However, Dorothy's story (Act 4) of the long term involvement she has had in local politics provides an interesting contrast to this assumption, as do the many examples of the women learning together in less formal projects.

Dorothy's case also raises other questions about the extent to which those that acquire the skills and knowledge that appear to belong to a mainstream society have excluded themselves from those they profess to represent. Dorothy, questioned about dropping her radical stance on the Challenge Board, is accused of becoming assimilated as a board member by Iona: *'You change your tune Dorothy'*. However, Dorothy responds, defending her position as *'a very important role and I am responsible and have to be seen to be respectful'*. She both rejects the accusations of betraying her principles and her roots in the group and also explains what may appear a more conciliatory stance. However, it again accentuates the idea of insider and outsider roles and how education and

qualifications are both aspirations and potentially the source of divisions. Sociality understood through these narratives is dynamic and not static and can be both a source of cohesion and create tensions.

The kind of exchange described above, resonates with commentary highlighted in Chapter 2 when it was noted that we could not learn without belonging [to something] and we cannot belong without learning the norms and practices of the settings or groups to which we hope to belong. Otherwise, in Lave and Wenger's (1991) terms we are peripheral outsiders. Whilst I pointed out in Chapter 5, that older black women may not view local community organisations or networks as representative of their interests and needs, the narratives suggest that their collective strength in the projects where they have learnt or participated, has contributed significantly to their learning achievements.

Laughter also recurs in my commentary, as a way of asserting individual and collective identities in the process of learning, with examples, such as, 'intense laughter' and 'laughing profusely at her, own statement'. In Act 4, I noted 'the cheery voices of older Caribbean women laughing away' and sometimes the laughter is exclusive. However, this focus on laughter and enjoying the process of learning later in life, is almost as if the women were making up for lost time, having for some, finally overcome past barriers and the lack of confidence instilled at an early age. This sense of enjoyment both underpins and enables learning and at the same time, is a benefit of learning. The women recognise and welcome the fun in the process while also feigning self-criticism, as if they should be engaged in something more serious, that is, more conventional schooling. As Merlina comments: *'The girls are not learning – they just sky larking – they learning about other people's business – sure!'* (All laughing).

### ***A place for learning in later years***

This last section of analysis before I return to examine themes from a slightly different perspective, connecting these to aspects of literature and my original research questions, concerns *Place*. Clandinin and Huber (2010: 30) refer to this as 'the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place and sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place'. The informal learning settings (in the form of community centres,

tenants' halls and other places of learning) are settings where the women are engaged in humorous banter, accusations, revelations, retold stories and introduced new insights to old stories, alongside other aspects that they identify as 'learning'. Here the women experienced polyrhythmic cultural awakenings and intersecting realities emerging simultaneously (Sheared, 1999). The spaces where I spoke with the women were mostly cheerful learning environments where a variety of invaluable projects were under way. The community centres provided opportunities to socialise with other women from similar backgrounds, and in the case of the group of women meeting at someone's home, there was a strong sense of using a location for inclusion of quite a close-knit group and exclusion of others. In this sense sociality and identity are closely interwoven with learning places; and the women's sense of belonging to these 'places' underpinned their motivations for learning.

In their stories the women joked about the reasons for attending the informal centres of learning, often playing down the energy they exerted in learning new skills, information seeking and engaging in different projects. In Act 6, Annie explains: *'We just come for a laugh'* while Merlina offers that they, *'Just to make commess in the place'*. In Act 1, Pamela accounts for taking part by saying that she *'just like to be in here - so I can have a rest from my house'*. It is almost as if by understating or making light of the learning involved for many of them, it allows the seriousness of what they have engaged in to matter less, so that they can be all the more elated about their achievements. But this lay on understatement could not happen in more formal learning settings. Perhaps understatement is also a way of overcoming the past when too many barriers prevented them from making progress in education. As Anselma (Act 1) acknowledges, *'It is very hard work just having to come here sometimes'*. Underlying the jokes, then, is a very serious purpose.

In a 'story of conversation' (Act Two), Minnie who features across all the scenes in the Act, as a volunteer at the community centre – is a place which serves a number of purposes. It is where the women meet, where they eat, where they are caught up in the issues of the day, as well as the setting for their learning. The centre was important to the women and Minnie had a key role there, serving the meals but also at the centre of the

other women's narratives. They described education as her number one priority, firstly for her son and then for herself. As the story unfolds the other women recount Minnie's life, explaining how, '*She wanted to go to university but instead she sacrifice her life for that boy*' (Edith). Rosamond described how, '*He is her life - right her at the centre*', with Cindy emphasising, how hard Minnie's life had been, '*with that boy child you know, and she was managing so well on her own*'. Marlene added the final sad revelation that, '*all that education and he don't amount to nothing*', offered in way that they all seemed to recognise: the need to put children first but ways that those hopes in education could be disappointed. This setting then offered a location for support, reflection and shared disappointments that enabled them to overcome past difficulties and finally take up their own second chances.

The places or settings for learning played an important part in enabling what could take place. They symbolised both social and practical locations vital to the women and how they saw themselves in time and place – making the connections between the commonplaces of narrative inquiry – between histories and biographies, a sense of shared identities and social and practical activities enabled in the setting - whether this was learning in the luncheon club, the tenant's hall or the cutting room of the carnival centre. In Act 5, I asked:

'So is it much more convenient to learn here at the centre?' But convenience was only a small part of Rashida's understated response in '*Of course...*'

### **Older black women learning together**

I now turn to explore some commonalities among the themes which I drew from the narratives using a slightly different perspective which responds to some of the questions I raised earlier around gendered learning spaces; understandings of West Indian community; learning, ageing and well-being; and ways that the women understand their learning. In particular, I examine benefits in how the women have constructed their learning and actions, which have implications for their wider communities, and reflect the different models of lifelong learning considered in Chapter 3.

### *Older black feminist voices*

Clandinin and Huber (2010:45) argue that ‘it is important that the voice of the inquirer does not write over the voices of participants...by using an overly dominant researcher signature’, and my research has aimed to give voice to the experiences, cultures and histories of women who have been excluded from the educational mainstream through many years. In exposing, in ‘womanist ways’(Walker, 1993), the patterns of learning that women in my study engaged in, I have been able to highlight the particular approaches that first generation African Caribbean women take to learning inside what I have defined as ‘matriarchal hubs’ in UK settings.

In ‘stories of informal learning’ (Acts 1-3) the women interacted with others in social networks and in groups engaged in reading, oral expression and writing. Here the narratives highlighted the extent to which lifelong learning had emerged as a result of first generation African Caribbean women revealing their varied and nuanced life experiences in the Caribbean and the UK. In such situations, the women provided insights into their learning lives and how they assisted in the learning development of others (both within and outside the immediate learning group). Here, the women demonstrated the importance of social participation and the confidence gained through sharing life experiences and insights with supportive others to enable trust and engagement in learning settings. As previously discussed (Chapter 3), Schuller and Watson (2009) emphasized the gendered nature of lifelong learning, with women more likely to learn in publicly funded or community facilities, compared to men who are more likely to learn at work or independently. The majority of the stories bear this out: most of the older black women were learning (and participating) within such settings, and in Acts 4 and 5, the women expressed concerns about continued funding for their projects and community centres. The provision of funding for lifelong learning therefore has gendered and racialised implications, with lack of funding for the black, minority ethnic and women’s projects where they learnt or engaged in activities likely to be a major concern for the future, as community and adult education projects experience severely reduced funds.

My findings support and confirm the absence of black voices in the lifelong learning discourse, which I highlighted in earlier chapters, and extend insights and understanding through contributing detailed empirical data to research in this field. The existing literature also highlighted societal shifts of relevance to women: from structured traditional roles and expectations of looking after the family in the home, to a higher risk society depicted by an analysis of reflexive modernisation (Giddens, 1990), where individualisation of resources and choices breaks down a sense of community or social responsibility. This recognition of reflexive and individualised choices is also borne out in my findings, when the women finally see themselves as ‘freed’ of their full time family and home responsibilities and are able to make their own carefully considered choices about what to engage in. They can then contrast their past and present lives. My research specifically uncovered such realisations when the women talked about extending their care and support to younger African Caribbean generations to ensure different and better learning experiences, and in their perceptions of the different attitudes of this group.

### *Developing, collaborative gendered voices*

In Chapter 3 I referred to lifelong learning as a broad and ambiguous concept, embracing education that is flexible, diverse and available at different times and in different places; and the women in my study illustrated that learning did indeed emerge in a variety of ways. Their language moved in and out of different time periods, experiences and speech patterns and seemed to surface in rhythms inclusive to the groups of women but seldom adopting easy to follow chronologies for an outsider. Nevertheless, the emotional exchanges underlying the stories ensured that I connected with their meanings, and on most occasions, understood the patois they used.

At different times in the research process, the women excluded me when they wished to, scolded me, judged and patronised me. They neither shied from demonstrating their mistrust nor from offering trust when they felt it was due but they also welcomed me into a collaborative process of story-telling about past and present learning and future aspirations. Anselma (Act 1) who initially hid her inability to read until her later years from other women in the project illustrates how social participation with a collaborative



group of women inspired her with the confidence for her to overcome her earlier shame and dissimulation. The context - the polyrhythmic nature of the environment with the women participating together - provided the right atmosphere for her learning to flourish.

June, in Act 4, also points out the collective nature of their learning enterprise, identifying the tutor, Tatiana more as a facilitator, sharing skills and boosting confidence:

*We are all learning and improving along the way and Tatiana (Trainer) is good at encouraging us, she makes us feel better about succeeding and feeling good. Like what we are doing is important and worthwhile (June).*

In all the groups of women, the importance of having control of their own learning and recognising what they wanted to focus on (or not) came across strongly. For example, in Act 1, Pamela challenges the researcher: *'If you come to talk 'bout slavery - don't even bother.'* As well as illustrating how they manage their learning processes, many of the women also showed considerable awareness of what they brought to their learning, and the gaps they wanted to overcome, such as Letitia (Act 4) explaining that, *'I did not ask questions before because I did not have any facts'*. This awareness also extended to acknowledging how the other women had helped them. As well as Anselma's case above, Deloris (Act 3) highlights how, *'these women provide me with the inspiration I need when writing for the magazine'*. Despite the very different levels of knowledge and ability among the groups and the varied purposes between different groups of women, the centrality of continuing to learn, the importance and value of education was a recurrent theme. As Rashida (Act 5) described, *'To me you can never feel satisfied without education. You just feel something is missing and you have to strive for it'*. Women negotiating and managing these informal learning spaces together was a crucial part of pursuing those aspirations.

### ***Older black women learners: benefits and responsibility for the wider community***

Chapter 2 argued that Black feminist epistemology can assist us in attempting to understand the benefits of lifelong learning for first generation African Caribbean women, and the theme of community and caring for the extended, wider community

signified expectations of social responsibility among black women. Chapter 3 explored lifelong learning as a broad and ambiguous concept that is flexible, diverse and available at different times and places throughout people's lives. Both themes are central to the stories told by the women in this study. However, Cropley's (1980:30) idea of lifelong learning as 'dipping into education *as and when we like*' (my emphasis) was not an option for the vast majority of the first generation African Caribbean women interviewed. Their caring and other social and economic responsibilities had invariably posed barriers to continuing education and thus the socio-economic and cultural contexts creating practical and symbolic barriers to their accessing lifelong learning cannot be ignored in any conceptual understanding of its flexibility.

In Chapter 3, I differentiated between lifelong learning which is understood as addressing past deficits; learning for individual benefit; learning as social participation; and learning which extends to social and progressive action (Jarvis, 2007, Griffin, 2000). Examples in previous chapters and the analysis above, display the closely interwoven nature of individual learning with social participation, extending ideas discussed by Lave and Wenger (1991) around social membership and learning to this kind of community setting. Yet coupled with many of the women's statements about the importance of learning together and sociality, were their motivations: often around helping others in their families and wider communities. In this sense, they conceived of learning as entailing social action, addressing injustices, whether it was mentoring recalcitrant younger learners; visiting 'the elderly' in the old housing blocks (Act 4); or presenting arguments to the Council. Many of the women talked about 'giving back' to their communities and almost all were involved in voluntary activity of some kind.

*Story of Challenge* (Act 4) and *Story of Courage* (Act 5) focus attention on volunteering in the community and the choices the women had made to develop their skills and learning towards helping others. As Yvonne notes (Act 4): '*I feel better equipped to serve the community*'; and Audrey (Act 5) confirms how this learning is now being applied and showing positive results in the black mothers' survival project that they have developed: '*Our support is already raising the self-esteem of the mothers.*' Perversely, it is often their caring roles which many of the women describe as having held them back in the past,

whether in their early years of education or later after coming to Britain. Their enthusiasm to learn for the benefit of others seems to encompass ways in which they are trying to help others to overcome the same traps.

Vereen (Act 7) moves on a stage, from describing her work as promoting greater self-respect, to intending to use her qualifications to promote greater empowerment. She wants to gain '*a teacher's training diploma so that I can help empower others*'. Similarly, Eldra (Act 7) who talks about a sense of pride in her new knowledge and achievements as finally a chance to spread her wings, recognising the benefits to herself, is nevertheless absolutely clear about her aims. She is 'studying for a diploma because 'I want to tackle social injustice!'

This aim to empower others seems to be borne from the women's own assessment of the injustices that need to be addressed and the focus varied to some extent from area to area. The social and informal aspects of their learning allowed the women to debate these injustices between them and thus to use their learning groups as ways of understanding and reflecting on the personal and political worlds around them. In this sense, the women's lifelong learning can be regarded as 'transformative' (Mayo, 1997:155), offering contexts, not only for individual transformation but also settings where social alliances and shared counter-cultures can be established to combat (past and present) oppressions and seek to address these with, and for, others in locally understood ways.

My research has explored nuances in the way that older black women learn, the importance placed on the benefits of learning and multiple barriers they faced in progressing educational aspirations. The significance of sisterhood, community and race underpins both the women's narratives and analysis of the ways that they constructed and made sense of their learning. This intersectionality of the different cultural experiences and identities was discussed in Chapter 2 and is borne out in the study. The women's approaches to learning and the benefits they drew were based in their 'first generation 'West Indian' experiences which were not separable from their roles as women, mothers, grandmothers or their community activities and responsibilities. Alongside individual benefits from learning, the relationship of the women to their wider communities and the

contributions they expected to make to widening knowledge and understanding or to working with others to meet social needs were closely intertwined. By considering this British context of African Caribbean women, my study contributes the idea of community identity among older women to ideas of intersectionality discussed earlier.

A further issue about respect related to community identity also emerged. While it was visible in the women's narratives that 'learning' is, in itself, was a valued activity which they recognised and celebrated through their present engagement, some women were disparaging about themselves for having failed in the past but saw re-engagement as a way to remedy their self-respect. For many of the older black woman learners, learning later in their lives therefore appeared motivated not just by acquiring wider knowledge or a qualification but represented a 'badge of honour'. In the minds of many of the women, learning achievements seemed to send out a clear signal to others in the community, culminating in respect on both sides. For the women, learning symbolised honour, emancipation, hope and pride in overcoming a challenge. It also earned respect from their communities, with 'education' representing a source of strength which the women had gained and could also utilise by working alongside others. Arguably this feeling of supporting, 'representing' or promoting change in the community may have resided in the minds of the women participants and it was beyond the scope of this study to investigate the extent to which this is acknowledged by their wider communities.

### ***Exposing lifelong learning for critical consciousness***

The ways in which the women maintained their sense of social responsibility for others and their adherence to expectations of giving back to their communities, however, belie arguments around the breakdown of traditional family and community ties and individualisation of destinies. Despite individual desires for personal development and achievements, among models of lifelong learning discussed in earlier chapters, learning which develops critical consciousness was prevalent. This was observed through social commitments and motivations in the learning activities of the women, such as those (Act 5) who participated in the Hanston black women's survival project. This Act, in particular, also demonstrates the potential for lifelong learning to create social

movements, where the women are addressing collective social concerns, not only through their learning focus but also taking that learning into the community, for example, by supporting mothers and grandmothers of children involved in gun crime. Their shared learning network supports them in doing this, raising their own knowledge and awareness, as they critically debate issues around youth, justice, family loyalty, gangs and criminality. Cases in the study also provide examples of individual learning benefits used for mentoring, to support black mothers' survival and to empower or to address injustices – transformative both for self and others. This duality of role is not without ambiguity or tensions as the women acknowledge changing attitudes and ways of life in their stories.

In Act 7, Eldra's case depicts a Caribbean grandmother whose lifelong learning simultaneously contributes to learning for others and her own development, whilst others learnt from her. As Cropley (1980) describes, she is part of a host of people who are not trained, paid or acknowledged as teachers but perform a significant and influential role in others' learning lives. Eldra also reflects the tensions displayed by other women in moving away from her own caring role in the home into wider community roles. As she engages more reflexively with her own individualised learning needs, making better informed choices about how to progress her life as a result of her new learning, she also balances and retains her roots and purposes in sharing her knowledge and skills, like Vereen, aiming 'to empower others'.

### ***Emergence of matriarchal learning hubs***

Among the strongest features to emerge from study of these women learning in community settings were the ways in which the women took charge of their learning, asserting their positions, bringing their biographies, identities and the challenges of their personal lives and communities into their learning lives, and in some cases, into their homes. In such scenarios, matriarchal learning hubs developed as a result of the women learning in womanist ways, where the cultural learning spaces inspired and enabled new confidences and learning to flourish. These matriarchal learning hubs fostered opportunities for learning, in similar ways to that described by hooks (2003): learning which could be passed on as the women became mistresses of their own development.

Away from external facilitators, the women in this study had a chance to be themselves ‘alone and together’, as lifelong learners in a struggle to remain active, motivated and useful members of society.

Their own sense of achievement and respect for life and learning in the wider community suggests that older black women may not depend entirely on public services in order to sustain their learning but that public funding had inevitably played a major role in making community-based learning environments available. In most cases, this was a clear first step to promoting the necessary social interaction for the emergence of matriarchal learning hubs. The women closely guarded such gendered spaces and it allowed the older black women opportunities to set their own boundaries, excluding outsiders as and when they required. This also enabled them to reflect, combat fears, and comfortably engage with their values, culture, ideologies and beliefs (Jones and Barron, 2007), as they pursued learning for social justice in a variety of ways. And whilst networks of trust and belonging cemented the women’s learning hubs, my research demonstrates that separateness may also have undermined their needs since they also relied on external resources to assist them in achieving their learning goals. Here the uniqueness of their polyrhythmic learning realities meant that at times they could be seen as at risk of alienating those with the resources to help them pursue wider learning goals. However, whilst those in the study valued and shaped their (often non negotiated) womanist learning spaces, when it suited them, the women were also comfortable working alongside other groups of women and men, outside these treasured spaces in women’s centres, town halls, schools, challenge boards, tenants’ organisations and other local community spaces. They acknowledged these settings as valuable for achieving particular long-term learning goals, and for providing them with the external connections necessary to pursue issues such as funding and more varied or wider learning opportunities. Thus my research demonstrates the significance of informal feminist learning spaces which in the case of first generation African Caribbean women served to counteract the negative influences of post-colonial, male dominated teaching and learning environments, offering strong bases from which they could pursue wider goals.

***Black feminist third age learners: building social capital and breaking through barriers***

My research illustrates the nature and solidity of the women's friendships. In this sense, informal learning can be seen to promote social capital both building stronger informal feminist ties among the women and strengthening community networks, through shared learning and extending co-operation and trust more widely. Chapter 6 illustrated bridging social capital, where participation in lifelong learning is connected to increased levels of practical community association, and this can be seen in the voluntary activities of the women in Act 4. Here, their involvement as older black women board members in the local Lossington regeneration initiative, supported their learning and increased their knowledge, extending their networks of participation.

Previously in Chapter 3, the right to learn throughout life was argued as a basic human right (Schuller and Watson, 2009) and this speaks to rights and social justice and the need to cater for an ageing population as on-going learners. At the start of each Act in preceding chapters, the ages of all the women presented in the stories were identified, illustrating that about a third were 70 or over with two in their 80s and learning far beyond the third and fourth ages. Among many of the women's stories, basic human rights to education had been denied at various points in their lives and now they had challenged themselves and broken through the emotional barriers that had previously restricted their learning lives. Active engagement in learning and its social and personal benefits in the third age are hard to miss in the women's positive, feminist narratives about their achievements. Accessing formal education at age 70 or more, in a system that has often denied opportunities on grounds of age, gender, economic need, race and prior qualifications, can be identified as a socially progressive model of lifelong learning, with the Explorers initiative offering an example of formal education access for older learners. However, arguably, this access route to formal education still relied on the women's prior knowledge and experience. For example, a number of women had been involved in trade union work, and may not have secured their places in this scheme without this grounding or political education.

***Exposing the deficit model of lifelong learning for older black women***

In Chapter 3, I discussed the various social models of lifelong learning and which I return to here in my findings chapter. Many approaches to education whether implicitly or explicitly adopt a deficit model of learning, assuming the superior value of knowledge to be imparted over learners' knowledge and experiences. Alternatively, approaches offer 'compensatory' skills to equip learners for labour market entry. Here, many women in my study had been subjected to economic hardship and faced social inequalities, which were structurally embedded in the societies that they came from and then joined. As a result they have experienced multiple barriers to learning and educational achievements. It is easy to assume (as some women in Act 7 do) that a lack of personal academic achievement is the fault of the individual or her family or cultural traditions, and not the result of structural, gendered and racialised barriers that she has encountered in her life.

However, just as the previous section highlighted tensions between strong matriarchal hubs and outsiders, and between learners and funders, in the Hanston Heritage centre, the strengths or social capital built through non-formal learning had generated distrust from outsiders, as community centre men and women were forced to compete for scarce resources. Equally, in parallel, with critical research on lifelong learning (Burke and Jackson, 2007), this study shows that it would be a mistake to assume that remedying the apparent learning deficit is the appropriate approach for lifelong learning in these contexts. Again there is a tension: the women were often ready to assume blame for not trying harder but aware of injustices and hardships, and wanted their learning to count. While they sought recognised diplomas, they also wished to be engaged in something which both valued, and was meaningful for, their experiences.

The women's stories demonstrated that, in many cases, a lack of previous education presented barriers to learning later in life; and in Act 7 (Scene 6) one woman's worry that others might judge her a welfare benefits' cheat in gaining 'free' education, offers a profound insight into her reasons for failing to explore learning once she was free to do so. Feelings of shame because of a poor early education, lack of qualifications and a resulting lack of confidence emerged repeatedly in the women's narratives, despite their



evident skills and capabilities. Learning in later years in informal gendered settings had therefore instilled new confidences, providing the women with a sense of purpose and eventual social responsibility.

Simply discussing ‘access to education’ therefore can be problematic, as the women’s many stories underline, highlighting the kinds of books, history and education systems that they had faced previously. Their stories raise questions about whose knowledge and education is perpetuated, demonstrating that enabling access alone is inadequate to ensure inclusion. Instead, creating the kind of education that neither superimposes knowledge nor is culturally exclusive is more likely to encourage participation by those previously alienated. It may not be surprising then that some of these women have opted out in the past or found it hard to sustain any effort to participate; or that they have felt more comfortable within community education settings, where they have been able to have an active stake and feel belonging. Yet the tension remains between informal learning over which the women have power, and the status of diplomas and academic achievements, which are embedded in the minds of the women (and where the tensions persist).

***Black matriarchs: learning and strengthening bonds in the community***

Through all the stories of learning presented in this study, lifelong learning can be interpreted as a process of change occurring within first generation African Caribbean women as a result of their experiences, and encompasses the whole range of influences that they encounter in the course of living their lives. In the women’s shared stories, the social benefits of lifelong learning are undeniable, and social participation is seemingly indivisible from the process of learning. The reasons that the women offer for learning at this stage in their lives span their past, present and futures, and provide significant insight into the possible nature of benefits gained: righting past failures in education; proving their worth at last; and practical and emotional benefits for themselves and others. For first generation African Caribbean women, lifelong learning clearly entails multiple dimensions: learning for pleasure; learning for the community (learning in order to provide support to others); learning for self-esteem; learning to gain respect from others;

and learning for social justice, extending the idea of critical consciousness towards social change.

There were a number of women in the study whose voices (primarily for reasons of space) were not featured in the various Acts of stories of learning. However, their voices were not unheard as their contributions resonated with those of many others among the first generation African Caribbean women depicted in this study.

My research revealed the ways in which, through informal learning, the women had become increasingly aware and shared knowledge of their surroundings, in particular, historical, cultural, and political and community contexts. In informal learning settings the women were able to strengthen their bonds with each other as older black women involved in a collective mission to better themselves, and in most cases, also to benefit others in the wider community. Thus they also spread their wings, both individually and collectively.

The chapter which follows turns to connect with earlier questions, extending discussion of themes above and drawing the diverse threads of the thesis together.

## **Chapter 9: Conclusions: Black feminist learning matriarch: A catalyst for change**

### ***Introduction***

Whilst engaging with a contemporary narrative approach, this thesis has provided a theoretical and conceptual account of the benefits of learning in later years for older black women who are volunteering and learning in their local communities. From this perspective, this study focuses a black feminist lens on the extensive existing lifelong learning literature, engaging in an area in which limited research exists. By interweaving black feminist voices into the discourse, both comparing and contrasting with African American feminist perspectives, the thesis incorporates black Caribbean narratives in order to provide a contemporary UK black feminist perspective. This lens and these epistemological approaches helped to explore the meaning of community in these contexts; and the value and distinct nature of learning in social community settings for older black women in cities across the UK.

This concluding chapter responds to the initial research questions and presents an overview of earlier chapters before revisiting the major themes emerging from the empirical study into the benefits of lifelong learning for older black women. These themes are grouped under five main headings: learning for inclusion; learning for critical consciousness; learning to enter the mainstream; learning for emancipation and learning for social participation. The chapter ends by considering the strengths and limitations of the study and its implications for future policy and research in this arena. It offers a platform for the adoption of a black feminist, culturally nuanced, theoretically informed strategy for cultivating learning for well-being among older learners in multi-cultural settings. Such a strategy is an attempt at promoting learning for healthier, happier lives where matriarchal learning strategies become a collective imperative for tackling isolation in depressed urban communities and where gendered learning can offer strengths of benefit to wider communities.

In summary, my findings show that the women in my study have been subjected to economic hardship and faced social inequalities, which were structurally embedded in the societies that they came from and subsequently joined. As a result, they have experienced multiple barriers to

learning and educational achievements. My findings address a gap in the lifelong learning literature and show the significance of informal feminist learning spaces which in the case of these first generation African Caribbean women have served to counteract the negative influences of post-colonial, male dominated teaching and learning environments, offering strong bases from which they could pursue wider goals. From these findings, I have constructed the concept of matriarchal learning hubs, where black women elders can benefit from informal social learning, and this contributes a further new dimension to the lifelong literature. The women in the study also exhibited a tendency towards a powerful shared language, an internal discourse within their polyrhythmic learning realities which served to motivate them, anchoring individual and group identities. The women's stories raise questions about whose knowledge and education is perpetuated, demonstrating that enabling access to learning alone is insufficient to ensure inclusion. Instead, creating the kind of education that neither superimposes knowledge nor is culturally exclusive is more likely to encourage participation by those previously alienated. Such settings enabled personal development through social participation but also offered potentially emancipatory contexts (discussed further later in this chapter). The shared connections established in these informal learning contexts, facilitated an increasing critical consciousness of knowledge and its uses, and the women were able to strengthen their bonds with each other as older black women involved in a collective mission to better themselves, and in many cases, also to benefit others and address issues in their wider communities.

### ***Responding to the research questions and themes drawn from the findings***

My research concludes that as a result of the nature of their social interactions in community settings, first generation African Caribbean women are able to achieve benefits from lifelong learning both for themselves and for their wider communities. In discussing my findings in the previous chapter, I considered the nature of participation in lifelong learning by first generation African Caribbean women, highlighting a number of barriers that they faced in accessing learning throughout their lives. The Acts in the preceding chapters illustrated the various learning opportunities that the women experienced and their benefits as articulated from the perspectives of the women participants. Finally, the social benefits of individuals' learning not only for themselves but for their wider communities were discussed.

In summary my thesis:

- Exposes the nature of contemporary black feminist voices among older lifelong learning communities in UK cities
- Demonstrates the benefits of unity, trust and solidarity in first generation African Caribbean women's learning communities
- Introduces the concept of matriarchal learning hubs, extending the idea of learning from social participation, showing the benefits of lifelong learning via gendered, social and cultural interactions
- Demonstrates older black women learners' aspirations to develop their learning and education for supporting others in the wider community
- Reveals the nature of practical commitment to promoting lifelong learning for social justice among UK first generation African Caribbean women, demonstrating the power of shared learning in promoting social change
- Provides rich new cultural insights into the nature of lifelong learning and its potential among older black learners and more widely

I will discuss these ideas in detail in later sections but initially turn back to questions raised from earlier chapters.

### ***Linking the beginning and the end***

In presenting the rationale for the research, the first chapter in this thesis reflected on the researcher's own experience as a second generation African Caribbean woman teaching in continuing education, with a background in community participation and an awareness of the emergence of the growing number of first generation African Caribbean elders in UK society. The chapter discussed the much explored role that learning plays in improving lives and the potential to give voice to an ageing black Caribbean population, many of whom had arrived in the UK as young adults eager to excel and widen their horizons in a new, seemingly prosperous country. It is clear from the voices of women participants in this study how significant their learning activities have been for them in

their later years, not least in addressing their absences from educational participation and wider social participation.

In Chapter 2, reviewing the mainly African American feminist literature but also black British and black Caribbean feminist epistemology, the thesis highlighted a natural tendency for older black women to nurture and support the extended black community<sup>31</sup>. Questions were raised for my research as to whether or not this was the case for older black women volunteering in urban community settings in the UK. My findings shows that the women demonstrated that they could enjoy and gain socially and developmentally and at the same time were able to give back to the wider community. For the majority of women in the study, there was no loss of personal benefits from lifelong learning for those who may have dedicated their later years to prioritising the care and support of others. To avoid pathologizing or stereotyping the contribution of older black women learners, among the salient questions I asked were the extent to which learning might be different for older black women as a result of their own personal and cultural commitments to helping others; and the extent to which they experienced greater levels of pressing social concerns. It was clear that the majority of the women in the study were living and interacting with others in socially deprived settings and that they experienced greater levels of social concerns, such as the effects of crime in their local area and the impact of poor education. In such circumstances, however, the women shared a desire to learn for the betterment of these communities thereby nurturing but also promoting enhanced knowledge and power among the extended black community.

In Chapter 3, the thesis explored the conceptual and theoretical issues surrounding two major debates in approaches to lifelong learning: on the one hand, a debate prioritising an inclusive social dimension to lifelong learning and on the other hand, a government favoured, economic imperative. This latter dimension focused on paid employment, neglecting learning pathways involving social purposes and general wellbeing. As a result of reviewing the literature, two major problems emerged. First, whilst lifelong

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31 An ambiguous and illusory concept (Brent 2004) as explored in Chapter 3

learning studies demonstrated its important benefits for older people (and women in particular); such benefits appeared not to include older black women who were largely invisible in the discourse. In an increasingly ageing society, this could be construed as a major anomaly as policies should, both in theory and practice, give consideration to all sections of the population. Second, the chapter examined the important benefits of learning in later years – not least for well-being, friendships and combating isolation – noting the absence of a significant focus on black, minority ethnic communities. Again my findings highlighted the benefits of informal social learning contexts for black women elders, supporting but also adding a further dimension to the literature in highlighting the inter-connectedness of learning and voluntary social action.

Chapter 4 argued the appropriateness of engaging with contemporary narrative analysis as a research methodology, combined with the use of a black feminist epistemological lens to incorporate the voices of participants, as well as that of the researcher (as integral elements of the collective narrative process). I revisited the women's stories when analysing black feminist theories in education in the UK and recognised my connection as a 'sister in the struggle'<sup>32</sup>, identifying collective understandings, differences and similarities in approaches to education and learning across the African Caribbean Diaspora. Alongside concepts drawn from lifelong learning debates, Chapters 2 and 4 provided significant lenses through which to view the design of my study and to understand my data.

The older black women's struggles in public sector led urban regeneration initiatives offered insights into the way power (Foucault, 1980: 82), is played *out*. In such circumstances however, the women employed their new skills in order to transcend them from the margins to the centre and from invisibility to visibility as their views are taken on board. In addition, the distinct feature of this transcendence was clearly visible inside the discursive informal learning environments where the women communicated in their

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32 'Sisters in the struggle' – in this context, black women grouping to overcome a shared adversity

confident polyrhythmic learning realities, the structures of which were highlighted in the various narrative asides embedded in the nine acts contained in Chapters, 5, 6 and 7.

The findings narrated in these chapters revealed the extent to which particular groups of older black women engaged actively as citizens, as visible elders and learners in their communities. Illustrated in these chapters were the women's successes in overcoming obstacles to their learning in an effort to become 'powerful outsiders', while maintaining a role as significant 'insiders' with the ability to influence change at a local level. In their project membership, officer or board member roles, the chapters pointed to the significance of learning in moving the women from novices to 'experts'. This transition was emancipatory as they moved to engage in legitimate peripheral participation (Lave, 2001), able to benefit from their learning strategies by their growing empowerment, developing both inside and outside the projects. The chapters also prompted reflections for the researcher, revealing that despite sharing the same ethnic heritage, she had also experienced this duality of roles in the research process as an outsider and insider, often openly challenged by the women but also welcomed and embraced by them as a 'sister in the struggle'.

The preceding chapter (8) highlighted the valuable role that learning played in the lives of older black women in these UK settings and that learning in the third and fourth ages has (potentially) significant benefits for a group typically susceptible to high levels of illness in their later lives. The chapter highlighted the polyrhythmic nature of learning that can be passed on from mothers to daughters, also pointing to the benefits of such learning in helping to improve the lives of the women and those of others in the communities around them.

### ***Key themes arising from the research***

#### ***Older black women: learning for inclusion***

Inclusion, as discussed in earlier chapters can be understood with positive and negative connotations, and the women's narratives pointed strongly to their desire to access education but also to have control of the terms of that inclusion. Not to have control



would have reinforced earlier educational exclusion and a deficit model of their learning. My findings uncovered high levels of alienation and exclusion among these older black women participating in local, strategic community initiatives in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. It illustrated the women's involvement in volunteering, leading to their participation in informal learning opportunities, primarily aimed at benefiting others; these routes became ways to challenge exclusion and engage with learning for inclusion. However, that inclusion was not necessarily in mainstream activities, and many of the women in the study were acutely aware that in addition to their separate informal (polyrhythmic) learning groups, a partnership with other board members and others outside their group was a necessary engagement. This was to avoid isolation from other mainstream community support networks, in particular, the funding bodies.

The research pointed to women learning for inclusion as they became aware of the demise of local projects and witnessed growing social problems and inequalities. However, this was not simply uncritical inclusion, but involved grouping together in support of their 'sisters' by participating in community empowerment initiatives. Such initiatives included, reading and writing groups, health and mentoring projects, where they articulated their views and used their learning to raise critical consciousness (Freire, 1974) more widely in their communities. The study therefore indicates women beginning to trust and support those providing them with much needed resources and training. However, there is always the possibility that involvement has been encouraged as a means to incorporation, thereby compromising the women's intentions to empower others in their communities. In such scenarios it is important to question who has primarily benefited from the 'empowerment' training made available to the women. Was it the existing Board members and local authority, the women themselves, the colleges, the independent trainers (provided with the funds to develop the women) or was it the wider local community who received support from the women? If it was the latter then the women's learning may also have involved development of critical consciousness.

*Older black women: learning for critical consciousness*

My findings concluded that in many cases the women's learning was developing their critical consciousness, and while not always explicit, this was implicit in their purposes. In this sense the balance in the compromises they were making had important and purposive benefits; and they were both taking control of their learning and assuming roles as responsible citizens, of benefit to themselves and others. According to the women, change would emerge when their voices were heard and their views taken seriously but also when the views of others in the community were concurrently seen as part of, and included in, the local change making agenda. Many of the women in the study believed that they were playing a useful role but their social capital and resources were often located within the (polyrhythmic) learning groups where they were both insiders and ultimately excluded from the wider community as a result of their positions on the local boards. However, the women perceived learning as a way of accessing the tools to further represent their communities. Their growing consciousness from learning and community activities enabled them to become privileged in their local community positions and as close to understanding local authority agendas as was possible.

The women in the study also exhibited a tendency towards a powerful language, an internal discourse within their polyrhythmic learning realities which served to motivate them, anchoring individual and group identities (Foucault, 1971) and enhancing critical consciousness; but at times, operating to exclude others. But whilst the women were powerful in their informal learning groups, they also gathered information from their membership of 'government' led community organisations to share with each other. As long serving board members, local councillors and others, they acquired new formal knowledge (from the experts) and by their incorporation, their ultimate power to effect change could be compromised. Indeed, this created criticisms among some groups of women.

In their polyrhythmic learning groups the women were 'alone-together': they were able to articulate their learning needs, trust each other and the polyrhythmic learning environments played a vital role, not least in reflecting (on) strategies for critical

consciousness. In parallel, with American black feminist literature discussed earlier (hooks, 2003), the strengths gained from learning ‘alone-together’ were crucial in developing the confidence to affect wider changes. If older black women are used to fulfil other, for example, policy-driven objectives, such as in empowering them with skills as ‘good’ citizens, it raises questions about the nature of empowerment and inclusion, and the extent to which the women here were able (and can continue) to subvert external purposes to achieve more critical or challenging agendas.

*Older black women learning and entering the mainstream*

This study assessed the disconnection between older black women learners and the wider research world and an inclusive cultural learning experience was uncovered, in which older black women learners were seen to have pushed through from the margins of lifelong learning, to a mainstream where they emerged as independent confident community learners. Most of the women in the study initially struggled to find an autonomous place for themselves in their local communities, after previously immersing themselves in what they experienced as male-dominated community projects (often led by radical anti-feminist activists). They also discussed little hope of securing future financial support from a deteriorating ‘post anti-racist’ local government grant-giving structure. However, by participating in community initiatives as volunteers, the women seemed to find a place to represent others, taking roles as mentors, local board members, and tenant’s representatives and in other prominent roles, where learning emerged as the catalyst for their changes. Here my research connects with the concept of peripheral community participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) discussed earlier, by asking whether the women were still closer to the margins or part of a core learning community. The fact that they were separated in their informal matriarchal arenas away from other projects and participants could be perceived as problematic. The actual polyrhythmic spaces of learning, however, were not confined to the community learning centres, but existed as informal social networks where in their familiar communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) the women talked *labrish*, made *commess*, took time to *cuss* and scold each other. Here they also challenged, joked and reflected on stories of back home, and in the process shared and importantly absorbed, new learning. In such informal situations, once learning

was acquired by one woman, it was cascaded and shared with others, with such opportunities for continual interaction supporting the women in fostering greater legitimacy and creating their own learning communities alongside others' communities of practice.

The strategy of separateness within wider communities of practice allowed an effective role to emerge, strengthening strategies towards a successful shift from the margins to a central community role and enabling the women to put their learning to good use more widely. Learning in this way supported the older women volunteers particularly and also ensured their control over their learning lives. Their shared common interests; learning together; and their collective sense of 'putting something back into their communities' emerged strongly inside what I have described as *matriarchal learning settings*, as they conveyed what they had learnt to others. In this way the women were creating more powerful and separate communities of practice by both demonstrating that they were informed and also sensitive to the learning aspirations of other black women. Here both bonding and bridging forms of social capital are visibly in play (Baron et al, 2000).

Firstly (bonding), the women drew on their social bonds to reinforce their exclusive identities and sustain their close cultural ties as they remained strong and trusting of each other, working closely together in their matriarchal learning hubs. However, the strength of mutual connections potentially denied opportunities for the women to benefit from bridging social capital (Field, 2005), in other words, to network and develop external resources since there was often little occasion to participate with others outside the shared cultural spaces that they occupied. In such situations, the women remained as outsiders, unable to benefit from wider resources available to others. Viewed differently, however, there was a visible process of extending social and educational resources.

Often 'policy' defines bridging capital as the desirable 'commodity' – to remedy deficits in social capital and in learning. This denies the value of the social bonds for the women in my study where they shared values and ideas with each other in lively polyrhythmic settings. In this way, the bonding in partnerships provided a platform to tackle

‘curriculum challenges’<sup>33</sup> ultimately assisting them in strengthening and extending social capital through participation in community changes. Volunteering is often assumed to be located with ideas of community bonding, yet for many women here, their engagement in active voluntary work encouraged them to participate in wider learning and a desire to effect wider changes – and became bridging routes to wider societal involvement. In this sense, far from representing a deficit model of social resources or a barrier to achievements, bonding social capital provided an important base and strength towards wider learning and in accessing social resources. Simply immersing older black women in learning activities over which they had little control - or reminiscent of past alienation – would have offered few opportunities to ‘spread their wings’.

However, during the course of this research there were already reductions in funding and in the availability of community spaces, and as these shortages intensify, those least connected with the local authority decision-makers are likely to lose most. Such losses seem likely to undermine the future ability of older black women learners to participate as active citizens in community contexts, since these projects and settings have proved valuable in facilitating the focus for learning, which has encouraged both wider learning participation and entry to community action. Where women in the study found alternative learning venues within their homes, they still relied on a connection with community centres and organisations in order to ground and disseminate their activities.

### *Older black women learning for social participation*

Chapter 2 argued that black feminist epistemology can assist us in attempting to understand the benefits of lifelong learning for first generation African Caribbean women. This research has concluded that first generation African Caribbean women learn by sharing voice in polyrhythmic learning realities, demonstrating distinct ways of learning in ‘womanist’ ways. Whilst the researcher’s ‘own voice’ was apparent in significant areas of the research, it was not to be found in the distinct and uniquely

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33 Such ‘curriculum challenges’ would include the various projects that the women were involved in when supporting others in the community – which parallel to the kind of Communities of Practice that Lave and Wenger (1998) argue are naturally occurring.

Caribbean patois regularly expressed in the women's narratives. Here, 'own voice' was to be found separated in the *narrative introductions, interruptions, asides and comments*, embedded within the chapters presenting the stories of *informal, non-formal* and *formal* learning in which older black women participated.

My findings show that older black women have a commitment to volunteering and to helping others in the community and as a result of their shared cultural background and specific experiences they were able to work and learn together well. In addition, the symbolic nature of the locations created conducive settings for learning to take place. Such settings - whether home or community based - were familiar locations for the women and signified their, often-marginalised activities. But as Lave and Wenger (1991) point out, learning which is embedded in social participation offers important strengths: the value and comfortability of informal learning within a familiar and supportive network, as seen in the various settings highlighted in this study. By working together, in polyrhythmic, situated learning environments, the women in the study were able to successfully progress their learning for the benefit of their wider communities.

*Learning for emancipation: purposeful matriarchal social learning movements for change*

In Chapter 2, I examined the diverse purposes ascribed to lifelong learning and the extent to which these are shaped by policy-makers or in alternative ways by learners. Previous sections have explored some of the ways that learning activities have benefited or met the purposes of older black women, and here, I explore the emancipatory potential of their learning activities. My research demonstrated that older black women were engaged in purposeful learning and were aware of this. Their purposes ultimately included emancipation, not only for themselves as previously disadvantaged in education, but also for the benefit of the wider community. While many women seemed primarily interested in providing sisterly support to each other and in obtaining a qualification and skills, these often carried the dual aim of helping their community. For example, the women's learning also involved mothers supporting daughters, and the initiatives they chose to get involved in were purposefully emancipatory. These were visible aims to build a less

dependent future for the next generation of women, building confident voices and to some extent, older black women in the study could be seen to care for all the 'black community's children' (Collins, 2000, hooks, 2001). This form of purposeful learning has significant benefits in an ageing society and is initiated by older matriarchs who will often pass on skills and unique insights, which influence lifestyles in the wider community.

The desire for learning and emancipation was evident in the women's narratives, and in the polyrhythmic messages spoken which transcended learning in powerful, compelling, lingering assertions of struggle. In such scenarios, feminist politics was to be found in the minds, the intentions and the reflective practices of the women in presenting their stories of 'back home', and in the younger first generation African Caribbean women's approaches to individual freedom and liberty. And whilst the more overt nature of Western feminism was often hidden from their discussions, the 'complex bounded ethnicities' of their varied Caribbean identities (Atrobus, 2004) kept the women focused on a just cause – learning for emancipation of their wider community.

As a result of coming from a wide variety of Caribbean countries, the distinctiveness of each learning group was evident in their approach to tackling challenging situations. For example, the women's stories of the complexities of identity spoke of lost confidence, which arose as a result of their heritage, and diverse, but predominantly negative, past educational experiences. Such complexities of identity also included their various shades of blackness, Afro-centric and Indo-Caribbean nuances, coupled with the legacy of slavery, causing pain, shame, hurt and exposing other personal barriers to learning. In some contexts, issues of sexuality were hidden but evident when shared in one to one discussions with younger first generation Caribbean women, who pointed to the unspoken barriers they faced. The women highlighted how learning in local, sometimes fiercely opinionated women's groups played a key role in helping them to find voice and in breaking down proscribed cultural barriers.

Again there were tensions between breaking new ground and embedded responsibilities, and the women's narratives illustrated the complex ways in which these were worked out.

First generation African Caribbean in the study who were mothers, grandmothers and great grandmothers felt a strong sense of duty to their wider black communities. This extended beyond their island heritage despite the acknowledged differences among them when they disputed values internally. Whilst Collins (2000) and Hudson-Weems (2004) reveal this matriarchal responsibility from an American perspective, for Caribbean women in the UK, this was often only a romantic notion or aspiration held over from their former lives in the Caribbean. However, my study shows that volunteering and learning in their communities had recaptured some of this sense of social responsibility, which was coupled with their engagement to learning and became emancipatory for themselves and others. According to Jarvis (2007) lifelong learning is often used to underpin emerging *social movements* and becomes a vehicle to address social issues at community levels. My findings support this in the case of older black women, demonstrating ways in which some women were able to use their learning towards collective changes, while others were furthering aspirations towards empowering others.

### **Alternative ways of learning for community**

In this study, older black women gained support and confidence from other women, and from the sense and strength of belonging were able to help tackle and respond to problems in their communities. As Colley et al (2002:1) noted: ‘We cannot learn without belonging (to something) and we cannot belong without learning the practices, norms, values and understandings of the community that we belong to.’ While this reflexive understanding of lifelong learning as belonging is visible from the narratives, many of the women in my study also experienced a dichotomy of competing tensions because they were learning and promoting change together.

Lifelong learning is therefore part emancipator for older black women and part purposefully responsible learning which can take the form (as cited in the women’s stories) of learning to improve the health of the community or to support communities affected by serious issues, such as black on black gun crime. In all such circumstances, a form of matriarchal learning can occur, for example, on the social housing estate, where older black mothers appreciate the collective sense of social responsibility and desire to



share knowledge which helps generate confidences to tackle major community concerns. It can be said that older black women are beginning to re-consider a lost role beyond the home, and in parallel with studies of their white contemporaries (Etienne and Jackson, 2011), learning becomes a vital pre-requisite and integral part of encouraging meaningful participation and active citizenship. My study here has revealed that lifelong learning has a strong connection with emancipation, and in view of the growing population of black elders faced with reduced welfare and community facilities, ‘an emancipatory approach to lifelong learning is perhaps more needed than ever’ (Biesta, 2012:6).

As a result of previous humiliation and shame experienced in earlier educational contexts, which the women’s educational stories have amply demonstrated, independence and control over learning was a crucial factor for first generation African Caribbean women to experience positive learning in community settings. The study illustrated the importance of learning in later years for the women’s development and well-being but also demonstrated its wider emancipatory role in redressing past injustices and potentially tackling future ones as the women found new confidence and shared their awareness and critical perceptions more widely and with younger generations. Older black women learners in the study have shown that they can free themselves of past learning barriers to influence and learn in partnership with others, within self-constructed communities of practice, where as a result of their shared ethnic and cultural heritage, they are able to excel together as learners, affecting their own and others’ emancipation. The women in my study were learning together with their own agendas, taking charge as they made decisions on what they wanted to learn and know as part of a newly emancipated, empowered group of learning elders within their communities. From marginalized and alienated experiences of education and schooling, they had discovered, created and were further motivated by the emancipatory potential of informal learning spaces.

Ultimately my research sought to explore the benefits of lifelong learning by examining ways that older black women promoted learning by interacting with each other in informal learning settings, enabling polyrhythmic realities to emerge. The thesis adopted a black feminist lens for contemporary narrative study of the benefits of learning for black Caribbean mothers and daughters who returned to the UK motherland as immigrants and

experienced this learning in their later years. From the stories of older black women in the study, learning was often synonymous both with respect and community, as well as redressing past losses – justifying the particular lens assumed. Whilst the research acknowledged the critical struggles of the black male in UK society, it chose to hear only the narratives of older black women as a means to understand the educational experiences of a largely unheard group of older learners. The insights that these women provide also shed light on a wider community of learners and the inter-related experiences of identity, learning, community, voluntary action and mechanisms for social change.

By combining study of learning and community in particular areas, the reflexive and complex nature of these two ideas interwoven with cultural and learner identities could be explored. The women participants were seen to take charge of their learning activities, bringing the community challenges into their personal and learning lives and into their homes. In this way *matriarchal learning hubs* developed from the women learning in ‘womanist’ ways, where the learning spaces inspired new confidences to flourish.

Such matriarchal learning hubs where polyrhythmic realities occurred, fostered opportunities for learning to progress as the women passed on learning from their classes and formal associations to other sisters. In such settings the older women took responsibility for the development of their own, sometimes ‘alternative’, approaches to learning, with narratives revealing a sense of achievement and respect for life and the wider community. Far from a lifelong learning model designed to instil skills and others’ knowledge, older black women appeared not to require public services in order to learn but were keen to bring and share their own experiences and skills. However, they were clearly dependent on support from the state to make such community learning spaces and sometimes facilitators, available to them.

### **Future policy and research: learning for wellbeing in an ageing, multi-cultural society**

In the sections, which follow, I critically reflect on this research, examining its strengths and limitations, and consider needs for further research and future policy for learning for elders in multicultural urban settings.

My findings highlight the significance of informal learning settings for older black women, revealing the connections between volunteering and learning activities. Many of the women in the study also experienced a particular sense of responsibility in their desire to use their learning for the benefit of others and towards community changes. Among the strengths of the study then was the methodological approach, which gave voice to a previously under-represented group in literature, weaving together past and present experiences, with future aspirations.

The women participants' deep interest in learning in their later years invariably emanated from a past, often shared, history of learning denials, humiliation and missed opportunities, where the vast majority of the women had learnt (been taught) from a rigid colonial education system. Other slightly younger first generation African Caribbean women in the study had experienced failure in a British education system where they faced racism as young commonwealth immigrants from the British West Indies. Many of these first generation African Caribbean women rebelled and found themselves outside the education system but those who managed to remain, appeared not to have achieved aspirations of accessing higher levels of learning. In contemporary settings, the women were learning together with their own agendas, taking charge as they made decisions on what they wanted to learn and what they needed to know as part of a newly emancipated, empowered group of learning elders. Independence and control over learning thus became important differences enabled in lifelong learning settings where prior education contexts had denied these. The study therefore not only illustrated the importance of learning in later years for older black women but also demonstrated its wider emancipatory potential in redressing past injustices and potentially tackling future ones.

A particular strength of the study was also in the wealth of data gathered from some 100 participants across a wide range of urban areas of the UK. While this provided diverse, rich and vibrant stories, it also enabled me to identify some common patterns. However, it made selecting which accounts to include harder, and there are many voices whose narratives could have opened up different tracks in the research.

Another strength in the research, enabled through its focus on contemporary narrative study, allowed me to capture the nuances of older black women's voices, their hopes, anxieties and frustrations – social and educational - and longed for personal learning desires. In particular, the presentation of multiple narratives exposed the many facets of liberation enabled through the learning settings, with women building trust and supporting each other, as together, they challenged past and present oppositions to their advancement in their efforts to progress as sisters in the struggle. This approach to gathering and rendering data also showed the different ways that women passed on their knowledge, how they situated their learning and established varied communities of practice, where they could appreciate the benefits of their learning.

These reflections on different community environments and the meanings each group of women took from them also revealed ways that their polyrhythmic learning realities flourished. There is also wider relevance from recognising the positive kinds of learning experiences presented here, in that community-learning environments can be replicated across many multi-racial communities with benefits for extended communities. The seemingly 'natural' evolution of informal learning practices, which proved positive in strengthening bonds and social commitment for these first generation Caribbean women in their later years, offers lessons for the value of informal learning for social wellbeing and promoting cohesive bonds more widely. Similarly the strong connections between learning and volunteer activities could have wider policy relevance. Linking the idea of matriarchal (and community) learning hubs developed from my findings to existing strategies for older people's learning appears significant in promoting the wellbeing of older learners in multi-cultural settings, yet these kinds of 'non-essential' facilities are diminishing rapidly. Away from more formal learning settings and external facilitators, the women have a chance to be themselves 'alone and together', as lifelong learners in a struggle to remain active, motivated and useful members of society as they age.

### ***Limitations and implications for further research***

Limitations in the scope of the thesis also represent areas of further research, which would contribute to knowledge in this field. Earlier I reflected that the women's feeling

of supporting, 'representing' or promoting change in the community may have resided in the minds of the women participants and it was beyond the scope of this study to investigate the extent to which members of the wider community acknowledged this.

A particular limitation in the research was the absence of a voice from others – from the wider community - on the impact of the women's learning. In addition, this empirical study, whilst exploring the benefits of learning could have examined reasons for engaging in learning in greater depth. For many of the older black woman learners and community volunteers, learning later in life appeared not just to be about personal development, enjoyment or acquiring a qualification, but as previously stated, for the collection of a 'badge of honour'. In the minds of the women, this would send out a clear signal to the rest of their community culminating in respect on both sides. For the women, that signalled honour, emancipation and pride in overcoming a challenge. Learning was also valued as a source of strength, which the women gained from working alongside others in the wider community. My analysis suggests that feelings of 'representing' others or learning for the community were present in the minds of the women participants but there was little scope in the study to examine the extent to which this was acknowledged or perceived by those outside these groups of women. The narrative depth of the study inevitably restricted this kind of breadth.

Research with members of the wider communities surrounding the women participants and exploration of their perceptions of the roles carried out by the women participants would have offered valuable additional insights into the benefits of these learning settings for preventing isolation and social exclusion, such as on local housing estates. This is future research I would like to pursue. The limited focus in the study on the nature of the organisations where the women carried out their volunteering and learning activities, as well as on any benefits of learning for older black men, also suggests ways that the research could be extended.

Another potential limitation of the research was that it focused on just one ethnic group – namely African Caribbean - and this could be considered a weakness, as the learning needs of other older ethnic groups are equally important and similarly under-researched.

However, the depth of research with one group in the population is also a particular strength, as the empirical study focused on the views of women who had shared cultural experiences of immigration at a particular period in time. This allowed the researcher to select participants with this background and to explore and compare the benefits of their learning. This approach allowed for a detailed focus and for narratives to be explored in depth. If the views of other (or all) ethnic groups had been considered on the impact of older women's learning, the responses may have been different, but the primary focus of the research and its approach would have shifted. If members of the wider local population had been asked similar questions, their prior experiences of learning would have been more diverse and shaped by different language and cultural experiences. This would clearly be a significant extension of the current study and represents further research which needs to be addressed.

Chapter 8 uncovered a salient insight from the research, which emerged from a number of fleeting assertions from the women's narratives, relating to the significant incidence of high street gambling, which seemed to occupy the lives of the women's first generation male counterparts. This was often jokingly referred to by the women but with obvious disappointment and concern, prompting the researcher to consider the need for further research into how learning might play a role in providing wider choices and opportunities for improving social life among the older black population. While this was generally omitted from the women's stories presented in earlier chapters, it could provide an important focus for future research on lifestyles and learning.

### **In conclusion: a black feminist perspective on lifelong learning**

This research ultimately adds to the lifelong learning literature in a previously under researched area, and in the previous chapter, introduced new concepts for understanding lifelong learning, particularly highlighting matriarchal learning hubs and learning for community respect. The study sheds light on the learning experiences of what is potentially an influential group of learners, previously invisible among the largely, economically dictated policies of the lifelong learning arena. At a macro-level, the research challenges the sector to take older black women's learning needs seriously. At a

meso-level the research questions whether the local community groups, which struggle to provide the local environments, which foster this type of learning can be sustained. Also at this level, echoing Milbourne (2013), the research asks if the women's desire to pass on the benefits of their learning to others in the community can be adequately fulfilled in an environment whose socio-economic support structures and community facilities are shrinking.

Without extended community projects and facilities, the research points to the possibilities of learning that extends bridging social capital being curtailed as result of the women's learning occurring largely among themselves (ourselves). The future of lifelong learning of this kind is therefore in danger of not spreading its wings beyond the confines of the strong bonds of the groups of women, significantly limiting its extended benefits for future generations in each distinct learning location. It remains to be seen whether the strengths created by these bonds in matriarchal hubs are sufficient for creative action and change to continue as infrastructures crumble. The thesis demonstrated that older black women as a result of their<sup>34</sup> particular lived experiences, distinct ways of working together and their desire for learning, have a particular contribution to make in helping to improve their local communities and the learning and conditions for future generations. Older black women learners have demonstrated that they can free themselves of past learning barriers to influence and learn in partnership with others, establishing their own learning spaces, within self-constructed communities of practice, where as a result of their shared ethnic and cultural heritage, they are able to excel together as learners, affecting their own and others' emancipation.

This study signalled the need to hear a different voice in lifelong learning, one which is becoming vitally important as mixed communities grow and vulnerable older people become potentially isolated, with the depletion of local welfare resources and facilities. My research argues the need for continued opportunities to express this alternative voice, which embraces the desire to promote learning for emancipation and well-being in an

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34 This is also my own experience

unexplored and neglected area. Extending the work of Withnall (2000) and Jackson (2005b) into lifelong learning and older learners, this research introduces a black feminist perspective into lifelong learning. With the current, on-going debate around ageing and learning, this study highlights the central role of the older black woman learner as a key figure in bringing about particular practices in learning for the betterment of ageing urban societies. The voices of older black women in the study were significant in expressing the benefits and importance of their learning at a personal level and also for their wider local communities.

Beyond the scope of this thesis, however, are the experiences of first generation African Caribbean women and men, (and other ethnic groups) who are not engaged in community based volunteering and learning, and there are unanswered questions relating to the comparative nature of their quality of life and well-being which may, or may not be, better, safer or happier than that of the older black women studied here. These are questions which remain for future studies. The research here takes an important step forward in exploring the little studied roles of older black women in community learning environments, and not, as is often the case of educational research, focusing on African Caribbean success and failure in 'narrow, controlling' and 'authoritarian' institutional environments (Biesta, 2012:6). As first generation African Caribbean women, the participants in this study had gained success in their own ways but had also evolved together in collective learning hubs which proved effective and powerful ways of progressing learning lives and effecting changes in their wider communities.



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## Appendix 1: Information sheet

Lifelong learning and first generation African Caribbean women

### **INFORMATION SHEET**

*Calling black women aged 50 and over.*

*Are you interested in Lifelong Learning? Were you born in the Caribbean? Did you come to the UK between 1950 and the early 1960s? If yes – I would like to invite you to participate in an important research study exploring the benefits of lifelong learning.*

I am a PhD research student at Birkbeck, University of London and I will shortly be holding interviews at your local Centre. My research is being supervised by Professor Sue Jackson of the Faculty of Lifelong Learning, Birkbeck, University of London and all information gathered will be used for research purposes only. The interviews will last approximately one hour and will be taking place in the next six months at a local community Centre or alternative venue convenient to you.

During the interview, you will have the right to withdraw from the process at any time and to decline to answer any particular question that you may not feel comfortable with. Your name will not be used without your permission.

If you are happy to assist in this study, please complete the contact details form attached and place in the box located at:.....

Alternatively if you would like further information, please get in touch with me via the contact details below.

I thank you for taking the time to read this Information sheet

Jan Etienne,

PhD research student, Faculty of Lifelong Learning,

Birkbeck, University of London,

Malet Street,

London WC1

Tel: 0203 073 8355

Mobile: 07956 510 183

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## **Appendix 2: Interview themes and topics:**

### ***Research title: Lifelong learning and first generation African Caribbean women***

- a) *The nature of participation in lifelong learning (aims, activities, outcomes)*
- b) *Accessing learning: barriers faced – recent, past*
- c) *Accessing learning: opportunities available and experiences of these*
- d) *Perceived benefits of learning – for self*
- e) *Perceived benefits of learning – for others, wider community*
- f) *Understanding of lifelong learning*
- g) *Social participation/Volunteer participation- roles and understanding*

### ***Possible supplementary/prompt questions***

Learning and social activities:

*Are you learning/at the centre (How)? / Explain more about your learning activities / In what ways are you learning? / What social activities are you involved in? / How are you socialising /*

*What sort of informal activities take place here (at this venue/centre)?*

Learning and volunteering:

*Are you volunteering? / Involved in voluntary action?*

*How did you get involved in volunteering?*

*What activities do you enjoy most?*

*What activities are you involved in and how are you learning from it?*

*What are you learning? And how are you/others benefiting from this?*

*Are you able to pass on the things you are learning to others in the community?*

*How is your learning helping others in the community?*

*In what ways are others learning from you?/ How/Why is learning important to you now?*

### Appendix 3: Lifelong learning and first generation African Caribbean women

Table 1: Interviews – city locations

City	One to one interview	Group interview	Number of participants
Birmingham	5	1	12
Bristol	3	1	9
Cardiff		1	6
Glasgow		1	5
Leeds	2	1	7
Leicester		2	7
Liverpool	1	1	7
London	9	3	30
Manchester		1	6
Reading	1	1	6
Wolverhampton	2	1	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>102</b>

*Source:* Data, from fieldwork interviews

## Appendix 4:

### Lifelong Learning and first generation African Caribbean women

**Table 2: Sample characteristics of women volunteers: learning pursued and role in the community**

Name	Age	Type of learning pursued	Role in the community
Dolvis (Birmingham) (I)	54	Formal learning	Over 50s Club – Volunteer tutor
Betty (Birmingham) (G)	62	Non-formal learning	Community volunteer – Elders Group
Gloria (Bristol) (I)	70	Informal learning	Community volunteer – drama group
Catherine (Cardiff) (G)	65	Informal learning	Community dance tutor – Women's group
Mavis (Glasgow) (G)	52	Non-formal learning	Community health instructor
Enid (Leeds) (I)	61	Informal learning	Learning Lives Volunteer – Writers workshop
Ruth (Liverpool) (G)	71	Non-formal learning	School governor
Mary (Liverpool) (G)	71	Informal learning	Church Hall Volunteer
Cynthia (London) (I)	56	Formal learning	Tenants representative
Loria (London) (I)	101	Informal learning	Social Club member
Rima (London) (I)	63	Informal learning	Drama group volunteer
Juna (Manchester) (G)	52	Non-formal learning	Elders Visiting project member
Dorothi (Reading) (G)	67	Non-formal learning	Community Salon – hair stylist
Rose (Wolverhampton)(I)	54	Non-formal learning	Caribbean Cultural Centre Volunteer worker

*I = Individual one to one interviews G = Group interviews*

*Source:* Data, from fieldwork interviews (all names are pseudonyms)

## Appendix 5:

Lifelong Learning and first generation African Caribbean women

*Table 3: Characteristics of all women volunteers: learning pursued and role in the community*

Name/City location	Age/Place of birth	Type of learning pursued	Role in the community
1. Edith (London) (I) (G)	64 (St Kitts)	Informal learning	Coordinator volunteer <i>Elders Talk</i> oral history project
2. Rosamond (London) (G)	74 (St Lucia)	Informal learning	Elders oral history project volunteer
3. Shirley (London) (G) (I)	71 (St Lucia)	Informal learning	Elders oral history project member
4. Jonetta (London) (I) (G)	53 (St Lucia)	Informal learning	Elders oral history learning project volunteer worker
5. Cindy (London) (G) (I)	61 (St Vincent)	Informal learning	Elders oral history project volunteer
6. Maud (London) (G)	68 (Guyana)	Informal learning	Elders oral history project
7. Rosa (London) (G)	67 (Trinidad)	Informal learning	Elders oral history project member
8. Sylvia (London) (G) (I)	72 (Barbados)	Informal learning	Elders oral history project member
9. Dell (London) (G)	66 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	Elders oral history project member
10. Cynthia (London) (G)	52 (Dominica)	Informal learning	Elders oral history project member
11. Lilly (London) (G)	80 (Barbados)	Informal learning	Elders oral history project member
12. Mildred (London) (G)	80 (Dominica)	Informal learning	Elders oral history project member
13. June (London) (G)	55 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	Elders oral history project, member
14. Marlene (London) (G)	69 (Antigua)	Informal learning	Elders oral history project, member

15. Rose (Wolverhampton)(I)	54 (Barbados)	Non formal learning	Caribbean Cultural Centre volunteer worker
16. Elcina (Leeds) (G)	52 (Grenada)	Informal learning	Coordinator, Elders reading project ( <i>Staying for Now</i> )
17. Tilley (Leeds) (G)	72 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	Elders reading project member
18. Anselma (Leeds) (I) (G)	71 (St Lucia)	Informal learning	Elders reading project member
19. Pamela (Leeds) (G)	65 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	Elders reading project member
20. Patricia (Leeds) (G)	68 (Barbados)	Informal learning	Elders reading project member
21. Mary (Leeds) (G)	70 (St Kitts)	Informal learning	Elders reading project member
22. Deloris (Wolverhampton) (G) (I)	59 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	Chairperson, African Caribbean Women's Centre
23. Madge (Wolverhampton) (G)	57 (Barbados)	Informal learning	Member, African Caribbean Women's Centre
24. Trudy (Wolverhampton) (G)	55 (St Vincent)	Informal learning	Member, African Caribbean Women's Centre
25. Gloria (Wolverhampton) (G)	77 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	Member, African Caribbean Women's Centre
26. Flora (Wolverhampton) (G)	78 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	Member, African Caribbean Women's Centre
27. Yvonne (Manchester) (G)	61 (St Kitts)	Non-formal learning	Elders Visiting project member
28. Iona (Manchester) (G)	72 (Jamaica)	Non-formal learning	Elders Visiting project member
29. Dorothy (Manchester) (G)	73 (Jamaica)	Non-formal learning	Elders Visiting project member
30. Leticia (Manchester) (G)	60 (Guyana)	Non-formal learning	Elders Visiting project member
31. Juna (Manchester) (G)	52 (Trinidad)	Non-formal learning	Elders Visiting project member
32. Mary (Manchester) (G)	70 (St Kitts)	Non-formal learning	Elders Visiting project member

33. Rashida (Birmingham) (G)	72 (Trinidad)	Non-formal learning	Black Mother's Survival project member
34. Selena (Birmingham) (G)	74 (Guyana)	Non-formal learning	Black Mother's Survival project member
35. Inez (Birmingham) (G)	53 (Barbados)	Non-formal learning	Coordinator, Black Mother's Survival project
36. Barbara (Birmingham) (G)	59 (Grenada)	Non-formal learning	Black Mother's Survival project member
37. Betty (Birmingham) (G)	62 (St Kitts)	Non-formal learning	Black Mother's Survival project member
38. Theresa (Birmingham) (G)	75 (Trinidad)	Non-formal learning	Black Mother's Survival project member
39. Audrey (Birmingham) (G)	56 (Nevis)	Non-formal learning	Black Mother's Survival project member
40. Brenda (London) (G)	65 (Trinidad)	Non-formal learning	Hibiscus carnival group member
41. Merlina (London) (G)	67 (Trinidad)	Non-formal learning	Hibiscus carnival group member
42. Anne-Marie (London) (G)	75 (Barbados)	Non-formal learning	Hibiscus carnival group member
43. Beatrice (London) (G)	54 (St Vincent)	Non-formal learning	Hibiscus carnival group member
44. Evonne (London) (G)	59 (Guyana)	Non-formal learning	Hibiscus carnival group member
45. Maxine (London) (G)	55 (Trinidad)	Non-formal learning	Hibiscus carnival group member
46. Mindy (London) (G)	76 (Trinidad)	Non-formal learning	Hibiscus carnival group member
47. Annie (London) (G)	53 (Barbados)	Non-formal learning	Hibiscus carnival group

			member
48. Vereen (Leicester) (G)	52 (Grenada)	Formal learning	Black Learners and Achievers Mentoring Project
49. Candace (Leicester) (G)	54 (Jamaica)	Formal learning	Black Learners and Achievers Mentoring Project
50. Eldra (Leicester) (G) (I)	70 (St Vincent)	Formal learning	Black Learners and Achievers Mentoring Project
51. Liz (London) (G)	53 (Dominica)	Formal learning	Local Councilor
52. Joyce (London) (G)	69 (Guyana)	Formal learning	Local Councilor
53. Carole (London) (G)	60 (Jamaica)	Formal learning	Local Councilor
54. Julia (London) (G)	61 (Dominica)	Formal learning	Local Councilor
55. Elsen (Reading) (I)	61 (Dominica)	Formal learning	Community College Tutor
56. Dolvis (Birmingham) (I)	54 (Jamaica)	Formal learning	Over 50s Club – Volunteer tutor
57. Gloria (Bristol) (I)	70 (Curacao)	Informal learning	Community volunteer – drama group
58. Catherine (Cardiff) (G)	65 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	Community dance tutor, Bays Black Women's group
59. Miranda (Cardiff) (G)	67 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	Bays Black Women's group member
60. Ophelia (Cardiff) (G)	67 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	Bays Black Women's group member
61. Sylvana (Cardiff) (G)	64 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	Bays Black Women's group member
62. Perlese (Cardiff) (G)	66 (Martinique)	Informal learning	Bays Black Women's group member
63. Paula (Cardiff) (G)	68 (Barbados)	Informal learning	Bays Black Women's group member
64. Mavis (Glasgow) (G)	52 (Jamaica)	Non-formal learning	Community health instructor BME Health group
65. Ruth (Glasgow) (G)	71 (St Lucia)	Non-formal learning	BME Health group member



66. Ronda (Glasgow) (G)		75 (Jamaica)	Non-formal learning	BME Health group member
67. Rosemary (Glasgow) (G)		77 (Jamaica)	Non-formal learning	BME Health group member
68. Francesca (Glasgow) (G)		76 (Jamaica)	Non-formal learning	BME Health group member
69. Enid (Leeds) (I)		61 (St Kitts)	Informal learning	Learning Lives VolunteerWriters workshop
70. Ruth (Liverpool) (G)		71 (Jamaica)	Non-formal learning	School governor
71. Mandy (Liverpool) (G) (I)		63 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	Black parent governors support group member
72. Jennifer (Liverpool) (G)		63 (Guyana)	Informal learning	Black parent governors support group member
73. Lauren (Liverpool) (G)		67 (Guyana)	Informal learning	Black parent governors support group member
74. Prisca (Liverpool) (G)		66 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	Black parent governors support group member
75. Anastacia (Liverpool) (G)		67 (Barbados)	Informal learning	Black parent governors support group member
76. Mary (Liverpool) (G)		71 (Barbados)	Informal learning	Church hall volunteer and Black parent governors support group member
77. Cynthia (London) (I)		56 (Barbados)	Formal learning	Tenants representative
78. Rima (London) (I)		63 (Trinidad)	Informal learning	Drama group volunteer
79. Loria (London) (I)		101 (Guyana)	Informal learning	Social Club member
80. June (Bristol) (G)		52 (Trinidad)	Formal learning	Carnival committee member, Black Women's group
81. Brieda (Bristol) (G)		54 (Grenada)	Formal Learning	Carnival committee member
82. Jana (Bristol) (G)		54 (St Vincent)	Formal Learning	Carnival committee member
83. Princess (Bristol) (G)		53 (St Lucia)	Formal Learning	Carnival committee member
84. Annetta (Bristol) (G)		56 (Carriacou)	Formal Learning	Carnival committee member
85. Precious (Bristol) (G)		55 (Dominica)	Formal Learning	Carnival committee member
86. Bobbette (London) (I)		63 (Nevis)	Informal learning	Church hall volunteer
87. Sherline (Reading) (G)		54 (Trinidad)	Informal learning	Volunteer, Afro-Caribbean

			Salon
88. Romona (Reading) (G)	53 (Tobago)	Non-formal learning	Trainee - Afro-Caribbean Salon
89. Dorothi (Reading) (G)	67 (Trinidad)	Non formal learning	Community Salon – hair stylist
90. Corolina (Reading) (G)	54 (St Vincent)	Informal learning	Volunteer, Afro-Caribbean Salon
91. Cheraline (Reading) (G)	74 (Trinidad)	Informal learning	Volunteer, Afro-Caribbean Salon
92. Ida (Birmingham) (I)	58 (Grenada)	Informal learning	St Judes Social Club member
93. Cherelline (Birmingham) (I)	67 (Barbados)	Informal learning	St Judes Church hall Volunteer
94. Samantha (Barbados) (I)	64 (Dominica)	Informal learning	St Judes Church hall Volunteer
95. Thelma (Birmingham) (I)	60 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	St Judes Social Club member
96. Judith (Bristol) (I)	53 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	Caribbean kitchen workshop leader
97. Sherry (Bristol) (I)	57 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	Caribbean kitchen workshop member
98. Monica (Leicester) (G)	65 (Grenada)	Non-formal leartning	Chairperson, Leicester Black Elders forum
99. Eveline (Leicester) (G)	60 (Antigua)	Non-formal leartning	Leicester Black Elders forum member
100. Marissa (Leicester) (G)	77 (Grenada)	Non-formal leartning	Leicester Black Elders forum member
101. Kimmy (Leicester) (G)	78 (Guardeloupe)	Non-formal leartning	Leicester Black Elders forum member
102. Cherry (Wolverhampton) (I)	66 (Jamaica)	Informal learning	African Caribbean Centre Manager

I = Individual one to one interviews G = Group interviews

Source: Data, from fieldwork interviews (all names are pseudonyms)

## Appendix 6:

### Conducting Contemporary Narrative Analysis:

Sample 'Data Coding': Themes arising from the women's stories

#### *A story of reading (Anselma)*

Commonplaces of narrative inquiry	Transcript data:	Emergent themes:
<b>Temporality</b>	<p>'I come to the project to write with others and to get some more computer skills'.</p> <p>'When I was back home growing up...'</p> <p>'I brought it to England with me and I have kept it ever since'</p> <p>'It was really of no use to me back then'</p> <p>'I always knew I would be able to read it one day'</p> <p>'This was really and truly the start of my learning'</p> <p>'Nowadays I want to learn as much as I can'.</p>	<p>Symbolic nature of books and learning</p> <p>Interconnectedness of past, present and future hopes and also barriers to learning</p> <p>Understandings of lifelong learning through reading initially</p> <p>Regaining motivation and purpose</p>
<b>Sociality</b>	<p>'We still learn a lot from each other. I feel a sense of purpose when I am with the other women....'</p> <p>'He already did know that I could not read. I felt so humiliated'.</p>	<p>Shared and mutual learning, social participation with other women</p>

	<p>'All the other children were laughing at me'</p> <p>'He just used to like making fun of me and it was very hurtful. I just stopped trying from then'.</p> <p>'I feel very good about having this opportunity to express myself how I want to and not to feel shy about it'</p> <p>'I feel a sense of purpose when I am with the other women'.</p>	<p>Contrast with barriers in early schooling, damaging emotional experiences</p> <p>Gaining respect and confidence, regaining sense of well-being and purpose</p>
<b>Place</b>	Staying for Now' Black Elders' Project, located in a 'quiet residential street' in a multicultural area of the city.	Familiar location for women to participate socially and control learning space

### A story of mentoring (Eldra)

Common places of narrative inquiry	Transcript data:	Emergent themes:
<b>Temporality</b>	<p>'I blame my own self for not acquiring sufficient education earlier in my life...'</p> <p>'I want to start by telling you about my learning back home'.</p> <p>'As a child I was considered to have a very bright future and other children and the older people in my parish had high hopes for me'.</p>	<p>Assumed status of 'education' and associated symbols (ie books)</p> <p>Ambivalence and significance of childhood learning</p> <p>Circular reflections</p>

	<p>'This couldn't happen today but when I was a young girl, it just seemed the right thing ...'</p> <p>'Those early education school days were so important'</p> <p>'When I was growing up, in the British West Indies, you had to have books to learn...'</p> <p>'Well it was useful up to a point and I am still learning'.</p>	<p>between past, present experiences and future potential</p> <p>Shifting values ascribed to learning</p> <p>Different understandings of lifelong learning as personal development, sharing skills with others and sharing critical perceptions</p>
<b>Sociality</b>	<p>'I was afraid of school education for a long time and was quite fearful of the headmaster...'</p> <p>'I considered myself a very well respected young lady in the community at that time'.</p> <p>'We like what we are doing and the community respects us for what we are doing '</p> <p>'I did not class myself as having had a good education.'</p> <p>'I was mesmerised by what I was hearing...'</p> <p>'I felt a little embarrassed that if I started applying for education people would judge me'.</p>	<p>Emotional responses and barriers created around learning</p> <p>Education and work in the community as marks of wider respect and status</p> <p>Women - self-effacing and putting others first</p>

	<p>'I am studying for a diploma because I want to tackle social injustice!'</p> <p>'I am finally spreading my wings and doing something for myself '</p>	<p>Purposes of education: Goals in education as ways to address injustices for others</p> <p>Personal development</p>
<b>Place</b>	<p>Black learner's and Achievers project: a small supplementary teaching classroom located beyond the kitchen of the Lincolnvale Caribbean Community bakery, situated on the edge of the city centre.</p>	<p>Significance of place/space of comfort for shared informal learning, learning as social participation and signifier of control over own learning</p>

### Common places of narrative inquiry<sup>35</sup>

**Temporality:** Reflecting back, present and future learning journeys and making connections.

**Sociality:** Where the women express their feelings, hopes and desires related to education and learning

**Place:** the local settings where the women participate in informal learning

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<sup>35</sup> Sociological approach to analysing narrative inquiry framed in society and social contexts (Chase, 2005, Clandinin and Huber, 2010)